

The Star Empire

The Boy-Who-Lived-Who-Won-Who-Became-Who-Lost-And-Who-Left

Rape and pillage, that was her calling. It seemed such a distasteful occupation for a young comely woman such as Claris. Heck, the way she snugly hugged her figure in her stolen uniform, it was a surprise she wasn't jumped already by one of the rowdy bunch that crewed the menacing ship. Lust was her weapon, and the pirate officer wielded it like a finely honed edge. Manipulating those around her in her favor was not a difficult task. A simple brush of the hand along the cheek. An opportune stretch that happened to accentuate her modest assets. A dazzling smile while maintaining eye contact seconds longer than was the custom. All of them, subtle or not, was enough to make the men around her melt like sheep. She was a prize that they could not conquer, a fruit they could not taste. Simply dangling her carefully chosen fragrance in front of their noses was enough to ensure their loyalty, if not their compliance.

And with their compliance, she could do almost everything.

Oh, she wasn't deluded enough that she could take over the ship. For one, captaining a pirate ship required brutality, not subtlety. Two, the captain himself was extremely formidable, and possessed enough wisdom and will to resist her charms. And lastly, why would she ever want to?

Acting as the captain's unofficial second allowed her to garner most of the benefits of being in command, but without exposing her to so much of the risks. All the bounties and arrest warrants were directed towards the captain, leaving his insignificant crew mostly anonymous. If it ever came to disaster, she and the rest of her chosen underlings would be able to steal a cutter and whisk away in the depths of space, safe from the most vigorous pursuits. All the while she would be earning a modest but adequate lieutenant's share and live in whatever luxury their targets happened to have on hand. New Cuban cigars, fine Malagarian tiger rugs, the most enchanting non-Earth jewels – nothing of want was far from her elegant grasp. She lived like a prince.

That was not to say she was without talent. Everyone on the ship had to contribute. No one tolerated freeloaders, taking up precious

shares for little in return. The captain was an experienced veteran in the trade, and his solid if unspectacular success had drawn a score of dependable scoundrels, with Claris crowning the jewel. While her ability to command was as good as an average academy dropout's, her real asset came with her ingenuity with sensors and information. As a veritable sensor and information specialist (with the highly expensive and illicit implants to boot), she could penetrate her scans through the thickest of interference, identify strong points and weak points, and spot cloaked positions within a heartbeat. Her connections within the mercenary underground allowed her to receive word of juicy but little known targets of opportunity earlier than her rivals. It was all of this that the captain tolerated her continued presence on his tightly run pirate ship.

Normally speaking though, female lieutenants like her had to sacrifice a little dignity in order to 'prove' their loyalty to the captain. But she had chosen her posting carefully after scoping out a wide selection of unsavory postings. Other men would have taken her as a concubine – or worse, a whore. Females were little better, usually growing jealous and wrathful at her beauty and eventually seeking ways to get rid of her and her pretty ass.

Captain Hargrave in comparison was the best of the bunch. Experienced, cautious, and solid. Oh he had his vicious anger bursts like any other big-time name, but he only showed that side of him to you if you did something to actually deserve that treatment. He also wasn't above becoming physical in his frustrations, but at least he would never lay any crippling wounds, like a missing arm or a poked out eye. Hargrave was a man that adhered to both the stick and carrot, though he clearly favored the carrot. His leadership kept his mobile carrier at peak efficiency, or as much as was possible with a crew of undisciplined pirates.

As for his preferences, well. The dames he left alone, letting the men under him have their violent way with them. The little boys however... the younger, the better. No one, not even the most hardest criminals amongst the crew wanted to learn what would happen behind the closed doors of his quarters. To Claris it didn't matter much. Those boys were pretty much dead anyway, since their ship wasn't in the hostage business. It was too risky and bound to raise emotions amongst the families of the hostages, like attracting dangerous rescue parties. Better to keep the goods and space the unfortunate crew or passengers within their grasp.

A firm but wrinkled hand landed on Claris' shoulder. The command ring that mastered all of the ship's ultimate controls gleamed in ominous silver. The muscles squeezed, drawing her attention back to the bridge. She suppressed the urge to slap the hand away and instead turned her head to face the stern visage of her captain. "Aye, sir?"

"It's almost time. I want you to suit up and lead the second boarding party."

'WHAT?'

"But sir! I'm a bridge officer! I'm not even trained in boarding combat!"

The hand gripped the muscles of her shoulder even tighter. "No time like the present, Claris. You've been cooped up the bridge for so long, it's a wonder you can even walk under gravity. A little grit in your stomach will shape you up nicely."

There was no further use arguing with Hargrove. The captain could be whimsical sometimes, making the oddest and most banal orders, either for the fun of it or to deliver some undue punishment. Claris wasn't sure which one applied to her current situation.

"Besides, you were the one that scoped out this target. If there's anyone who deserves a shot at this mark, it's you."

'Gee, thanks.' She thought as she released the straps that held her to her seat at the sensors station. Another specialist left his own seat to take up her station in return.

Throwing a sloppy salute to her superior, she turned and left for her quarters. She entered the luxuriously carpeted room that she called her home and opened her oversized closets. Amongst all the dresses, uniforms, shawls and other fashions was a box containing her boarding armor. With ruthless efficiency she discarded her scarlet uniform and began the patient task of strapping on the modular armor.

It was a welcoming prize after they ambushed an unsuspecting military courier roughly a year ago. Though the information contained within its protected databanks was the main reason they struck the little ship, the passenger she carried was an added bonus. The naval officer was the same build and size as her, which delighted the crew as well more than herself. The HyperCyst Naval Combat Armor Version 3.2 that belonged to the officer was fully vacuum capable and could withstand up to Class II weapon impacts. That was better than most of the armors the rest of the boarding crew were equipped with. Most could absorb only a handful Class II impacts and only if they were in peak condition.

As she finished suiting up the refurbished scarlet armor, she picked up her decorated helmet and left for the docking bay, passing a few crewmen along the way. They nodded respectfully at her, even more so since she wore something imposing. A few of the ex-military washouts even threw a hasty salute, not that she cared about all of that crap. Leave the etiquette to the civilized.

The usual dozen that comprised the boarding crew looked up in surprise at her presence. Amidst the preparation of the boarding capsules and their equipment, the squad of twelve was clearly in their element. Not anymore with Claris' arrival.

Showing none of her doubts and fears, she calmly stepped forward to relay her orders to the lead of the boarders.

Gerchev grimaced at the news and spat out some of the leafy gunk he was chewing on. "So the cap's doing another one of his hair-brained schemes? Figures." The man turned to face the second half of his men and singled out their lead. "Rainer, you heard the news. It's back to second fiddle on this job."

Turning back to Claris, Gerchev laid a withering stare to the woman who would act as his second on this mission. "You might lead six of my men, but they're mine, not yours. The moment you act up Rainer won't hesitate to take over, you hear?"

Nodding, Claris left the bunch alone and decided to supervise the preparation of her boarding capsule instead. There was nothing left to gain by staying near. The boarding crew were a close bunch. They did everything together and never allowed any outsiders to join their circle of friends. She could depend on their compliance, but not

their loyalty. She couldn't depend on them throwing out a limb to save her from a difficult fix. She was expected to keep her head low and let the crew do their own thing.

Clariss could work with that. All she cared about was rape and pillage. The latter more than the former, of course. It was rather hard to rape someone when you were an attractive woman.

The intern clumsily bumped the overhanging scanner tool against the surface of the crystal, eliciting a loud crash that reverberated the entire lab.

"JOHNSON!" The professor roared, ripping his grey-haired head towards the unfortunate assistant. Dropping his holopad, he stomped over to the source of the incident and ripped the frightened assistant from the sample. "Get out!"

"But professor—"

"OUT!" The old man roared.

The young man could do nothing else but scamper away. The professor sighed and brushed his sweaty hands against the fabric of his clean white lab coat. With a steady hand the professor took over control of the scanning implement and finished the menial job of mapping out the crystal's interior himself. The other researchers weren't stupid enough to offer to take over. They were well aware of his obsessive need to do things right.

The overhead screen updated the results of the deep radiological incursions. A myriad of radiation and particles – all safe and non-lethal, of course – penetrated through the unknown crystal's surface only to encounter further interference. From what, nobody knew, but that was what they were itching to find out. Not even the most hardest of hull armor should have been this resistant to high-powered precision scans. If they could crack the secrets of the crystal's resistance, they could develop a new class of scan-resistant coating that would earn billions of credits in royalties alone.

Not that Professor Zhang was interested in such terrestrial pursuits.

If one shone a bright light through the blue-ish surface, one could see a darkened shadow in the middle of the horse-sized crystal. The

profile was too indistinguishable to identify what lay buried beneath, but it was enough of a hint for Zhang to extrapolate that there was a great treasure hidden inside.

After all, a crystal composed of unknown materials that was tougher than diamond by a previously unimaginable factor was unprecedented in human history. Zhang could conceive no natural process that could form such a resilient and uniformly shaped object. That hinted to the possibility that the construct was artificial.

It was a long shot, a ridiculous thought really, but if he could somehow divine the secrets of this giant crystal, he may find evidence of the intelligence that might have shaped it. An intelligence that may not be human, for no human knowledge could shape such a magnificent creation.

His fellow researchers and subordinates had no idea of the profoundness of this singular work of art. They were ignorant to its implications, blind to the suggestions that lay underneath. They thought only of the payout this discovery would deliver, not knowing the potential the crystal could grant something greater. Praise, acknowledgement and a permanent record in the long list of human achievement. In short, immortality.

Zhang was determined to be remembered in the likes of Einstein or Alexander the Great.

Sadly, the scans showed nothing except what he already had in abundance, interference.

"What in the blasted hells is WRONG with this machine!"

The foul-tempered professor kicked at the terminal in frustration. The machine, well-hardened in case of such occurrences, hardly made a beep in response.

Dr. Selner was the only one to speak out. "This only proves the material's value. Perhaps no ship-borne scanner is capable of penetrating the crystal. Besides, professor, we're only a week away from Gellard-15. I'm sure their more powerful terrestrial scanners would be able to expose the composition of this sample."

While Zhang wanted to retort that he couldn't wait a week, he knew in his mind that there was no other option. They had spent days throwing every diagnostic tool they had on hand on this research vessel at the object, to no avail. For better or worse, they had need of more robust facilities.

Letting out one last kick, Zhang stormed out of the lab, leaving the remaining researchers without any further guidance.

Selner just shrugged her shoulders. "Back to work people, we might not be able to do much, but at least we can lay the groundwork for the boys at Gellard-15."

The silhouette continued to rest inside the crystalline coffin, oblivious to the excitement it was generating amongst the crew of the vessel.

The prow had taken up a standard day. The Eviscerator stalked the innocent-looking research vessel known as the Helical Visage through the shadows of the massive Jupiter belt. Through all the asteroids and other space dust, it was child's play to keep itself hidden from the Visage's civilian-grade sensors. The captain and the rest of the bridge officers had extensively studied the specifications of their prey's class and drew up the most optimal plan for approach and attack.

Basically, as long as the Visage kept its powerful spectral telescopes and resource scanners idle, there was little chance it could spot the approaching little pirate carrier. Even if it could detect the Eviscerator there was little hope for escape, though it did give time for their victims to prepare, something Captain Hargrave was loath to grant. They might have it in their heads to destroy whatever bountiful treasure they were rumored to possess.

With patience born out of habit, the compact lines of the mobile carrier crept ever closer to the bulkier but defenseless shape of her mark. Using the tumbling asteroids and the debilitating effects of Jupiter's mass, the pirates leapfrogged their way until they overtook the Visage's predicted course.

Then, with as much subtlety as a sledgehammer, they jumped into the path of their target and launched their two sole boarding capsules from the Eviscerator's oversized torpedo tube. The fuel charge burst from the back of the capsule, propelling the projectile

and its twin ever closer to the dumbstruck science ship. Only half-way on their short journey did the Visage finally begin to dodge.

Hargrave expected this, and pulled his mobile carrier quickly into effective combat range to put a stop to any further antics. The old but reliable Reaper heavy varilaser cannon burst its electromagnetic beams with pinpoint accuracy. The Reaper was set to a deliberately underpowered setting to avoid causing structural damage while simultaneously allowing for a higher cycle time and a much lower heat buildup. The gunners operating the varilaser cannon were hitting all the preselected subsystems, disabling sensors, communication towers, and other miscellaneous systems.

The Eviscerator's secondary weapons finally came into range as well, and all its forward facing armaments opened fire. Projectile turrets opened up with EMP rounds, impacting with disrupting results. Miniature laser turrets took occasional pot shots but mostly sat idle, guarding against any unforeseen surprises. The carrier's sole two missile launchers opened up with short-range thermals that quickly circled round their prey to strike at the vulnerable engines.

The final strike emerged from the rear of the pirate ship. The hangar bays retracted, letting out the ship's most versatile weapons, her two heavy interceptors. Not that they were needed in this stage, but they hovered around the small battlescape just in case.

The Helical Visage never stood a chance in the first place.

The Asian professor slammed his fist against the schematic table. Years of scouring Jupiter's orbit, months of excavating the radioactive asteroid and weeks spent trying to decipher the enigmatic crystal were all gone to waste. Of all that Murphy's fucking Law could throw at him, it had to be fucking pirates.

Red lights continued to blare, all while alarm sirens were busy blowing everyone's ear drums off. Zhang flicked his fingers on the surface of the command table and manually cut the power to the annoying sirens. It wasn't like anyone would still be ignorant of the impending threat.

Still, pirates! How did they even knew they were here? The solar system was billions of cubic kilometers of space. The section of the Jupiter belt they were in was nowhere near civilized space, let alone

any outposts. The Visage kept its emissions profile low and locked down any external communication signals. By all rights, no one but themselves and the Exploration Society should have known where they were.

Unless...

'Jealous brats! We've been ratted out!'

The intercom blared a ship-wide announcement just as the first attack impacted on the ship. "This is Captain Jorne! Our ship is under heavy assault by pirates and we will likely be boarded at any moment. Sensors and communications have been taken out and the engines will follow soon. I have offered unconditional surrender even before the first attack, but it has been thrown back in our faces. Coupled with the fact that we have identified the ship as one of Hargrave's, I can only surmise we cannot expect any mercy. Prepare yourselves for the end. Captain out."

While every lab researcher looked around with panic or despair, Zhang felt nothing but utter rage. "NO! I will not have my work taken away like this! Not like this!"

He rounded towards the nearest person and lifted the doctor by his shirt. "You! Tell me what defenses does this ship have?"

"N-N-None! We're civilian and neutral! All Exploration Society ships are prohibited from carrying any ship-board weapons."

"Fucking idiots!"

Though Zhang should have considered his posting on a ship without any defenses and escorts more carefully, he had been too enamored by the prospect of great discoveries to care. Now it all came back to bite him in the ass. Grunting in helpless fury, he threw down the unfortunate scientist and went back at his command table. Instantly he opened up a multitude of tabs and input boxes, reconfiguring and reprogramming the aspects controlling the lab. Instantly the blast doors shut into place at the entrance, while a handful of scanners and analyzers began to orient themselves to the front.

"What are you doing!" Dr. Selner cried out as she rushed forward, only to be rudely shoved to the floor. "If we show resistance the pirates might kill us! We don't have any chance!"

But Zhang worked on unheeding his colleague's words. "Don't you know anything? Captain Hargrave is that notorious pedophile pirate. Do you really think he will show us mercy when you know what he does to children?"

The fact only compounded the hopelessness of their situation.

"I don't know about you cowards, but I'm not going down without a fight!" The professor went back to reprogramming the scanning equipment, feeding it massive amounts of power. "The lab is rated to withstand a small nuclear explosion. Granted, from within, but the armor is enough to force the bastards to come through the front. And while our scanning equipment isn't meant to be used as weapons, they have the potential to be one."

The senior scientist paused in his work and glanced towards his co-workers. "So are you going to let them kill you, or are you going to fight back and take a few of those bastards down with you?"

Somehow, that snapped most of them out of their daze. They helped Zhang reconfigure everything that could be used as a weapon into a weapon. A handful of interns and assistants barricaded the entrance and stacked tables and chairs for cover. Machine operators programmed surgery lasers into cutting beams and light scanners into a makeshift gamma emitter. Even the X-Ray emitter was taken from its overhead fixture in order to act as a deadly radiation gun. It would short out fast with the amount of energy pumped through its circuits, but even a few minutes was enough. The overwhelming sense of desperation urged them to act in one, last moment of defiance.

Lieutenant Claris barely had time to blink before the capsule crashed through the flimsy hull of the science vessel. The impact jarred everyone within, although the oversized inertial dampeners helped prevent much potential injury. Claris barely had time to stretch out the kinks before one of her subordinates undid her straps and shoved her out the capsule all the while resisting the urge to vomit.

"Fuck.." She spat out as her visor adjusted itself to the interior of the ships. Maps, schematics, and other details flowed through her HUD, most of it irrelevant to her immediate task. "Shit."

"Get yourself together." A gruff voice murmured as Rainer took hold of her shoulders and slammed her back against the bulkhead, straightening her out. "Now will you lead us or do we have to leave you behind?"

Claris punched savagely against Rainer's helmet, pushing him away. She did not even consider putting any elegance in her behavior. Not when a single mistake could spell her end. "Don't fuck with me. Now move the fuck out and secure our objective."

"Aye aye." The men and women grumbled. All seven of them then moved out to take out their first target, the engine room. It was not far from their entry point and they arrived fast enough to prevent any sabotage like self-destructing the energy core. Their pulse rifles cut down anyone within with ease as none of the engineers even bothered to wear hardened suits. This was fortunate since they didn't have to use any of their heavier arsenal that would risk fatally damaging the ship. A working vessel of any kind fetched a good price on the black market and they intend to cash this prize to the fullest.

"Engine secure."

The captain's voice quickly replied over the private command net. "Leave a guard, then move on to the next objective."

Claris did as she was told and moved on with five of her men towards the environmental section. These prove harder to eliminate, courtesy of their armored biohazard suits and whatever makeshift pistols they managed to smuggle in. One of her men decided to throw a pulse grenade, which flash-burned an unfortunate crewman while blinding the rest momentarily. Not long, but enough to take the opportunity to storm their position and take them out without any further fuss.

"Environmentals secure."

Gerchev sounded in as well. "Bridge secure. Put up a nasty fight, some injured, no dead."

"Right." Hargrave replied, before continuing, "Excellent work. Gerchev, sweep up the corridors and bunks. No prisoners. Claris, storm the lab and take out whoever's left. This should be easy. Out."

For a minute, Claris was surprised her team was chosen to take out the eggheads and secure their delicate treasure. Then, as she moved carefully up to her destination, she figured that it made sense. The corridors and other small enclosures were prone to ambushes. It took more experience and skill to sweep out the corners of the ship than to clear out a room full of defenseless dorks. Not that she tried to underestimate the remaining academics, but it was hard to imagine they could do anything lethal, like aiming a pistol in the right direction.

As they finally arrived at the entrance of the science room, they positioned themselves on both sides and prepared to barge inside. Rainer pressed the command to open, but the door refused to budge.

"Damn geeks, they hacked the door controls. Looks like we have to do this the hard way."

"Right." Claris said, and thought over her options. "Doesn't matter if we make a hard entry. Place the explosive charges and back off. We go in as soon as they go off."

Two of the boarders placed their doorbusters and backed off to a good distance. Trigger control was promptly transferred to Claris's command. With a short countdown, she set off the explosives.

Boom!

Heat, dust, smoke and other particles filled up the corridor. Unfazed by all the dust and protected by their armor, the boarding crew moved forward to gain entry into the lab and eliminate any remaining survivors. The outcome would not be as certain as it would seem.

For unknown to all of them, a certain blue crystal began to glow in ominous pulses.

Once there was a boy. There was nothing special about this boy if you discounted his slightly renowned parents. He was just a happy

little boy that did just what every little boy his age did, that is sleep and eat.

Then a certain prophecy came into being, spoken by a diviner of uncertain talents and uncertain results. This prophecy was spoken to one of the wisest and most powerful wizards of this age. It was also spoken in the presence of a betrayer.

This betrayer relayed a portion of this prophecy to his master, a rather dark and vile lord with a capacity of unrestrained malice. It spoke of this lord's defeat.

The lord decided that this prophecy could not come to pass.

Thus the lord worked to act against the terms. There were two potential targets. Both were attacked, including the household of the little boy.

Through the massacre of its parents, the boy nevertheless repelled a being far more powerful and dangerous. It would have been simpler to just drop a rock on the kid.

The defeat of the dark lord brought jubilation to the world, or at least the Wizarding kind. The boy was hailed as a hero, and became hence-known as the boy-who-lived.

One would expect that the boy-who-lived would live the rest of his life in splendor, and many wizard thought this to be so. None of it was any further from the truth.

The boy-who-lived thus lived under his new oppressive household. The boy-who-lived barely smiled, if at all, and was treated more akin to a slave than a human being. You could say the boy barely lived at all.

So, when this boy-who-lived was introduced to Hogwarts and the rest the Wizarding World, he was wholly unprepared, let alone ready to face the challenges he would face in the seven years of his attendance. He faced insurmountable dangers, suffered unavoidable tragedies, overcome impossible challenges until finally he was shoved forward to take care of the dark lord one and for all.

Through the use of the dreaded instruments known as the Hallows and the leg-work gone before this battle to rid the world of unholy soul fragments, the boy known as the boy-who-lived achieved the largest purpose of his life, vanquishing against his archenemy. The Wizarding World celebrated for a second time, this one more jubilantly and the boy became known as the boy-who-vanquished, boy-who-turned-victorious, or simply, the boy-who-won.

Now normally, such a simple tale would end as an happy ending where the hero gets the girl, who get married, who get kids, and see their kids go to the same school they went before.

This is not that tale.

You see, the boy-who-won, now a man, but still very much a boy, became a little too famous, or shall we say, notorious. The powerful instruments he wielded still he was unable to rid himself, drawing further attention to the nature of his treasures. The Hallows, once regarded as a simple tale of morality, was now very much real and blinding in its power to attract the greedy.

Duels, ambushes and assassinations became the norm. The boy-who-won would continually test his hard-won title, wracking up tallies as he defeated more and more of those who conspired to take away his instruments. Seeing as there was no realistic possibility of defeating a boy who was called the boy-who-won, they began to plot a way of defeating an undefeatable opponent.

They worked to kidnap and threaten those the boy-who-won cared about. Thus the murder of his wife, the slaughter of the family of redheads, and the massacre of his few remaining cousins and aunts, even the one family he did not care about at all. This enraged the boy-who-won, and drove him to retaliate in a manner unbecoming of a hero. The Wizarding World was shocked, but sympathized with their savior and pledged their unilateral support to see those villains brought to justice.

But the boy-who-won wasn't interested in justice. He slew ten times more than what his opponents had dealt in return. He slew those with only questionable connections to the direct perpetrators. He roughed up those who possessed only the tiniest inkling of useful information.

The boy-who-won did not seem much of a winner anymore.

His enemies were many, not all of them outlaws. Many were still positioned within the body of government, keeping their heads low and avoiding attention whenever possible. These administrators and decision-makers did all they can to shift opinion. As the years went by, less reverence was paid to the achievements of the boy-who-won. More and more, newspapers and other opinion makers began to voice their doubt of the sanity of the boy-who-won. How could one be a hero when he acted much in the same way of the dark lord he defeated himself?

Perhaps the dark lord lived on within him. Perhaps the fame and power corrupted him. Perhaps the Hallows themselves worked their nefarious purposes within his will.

Practically no one spoke up against these rumors, for all of those who wished to do so were massacred already. With no friends or relatives and no one else to depend upon, the boy-who-won was in actuality a very lonely boy.

Suddenly people didn't think as fond of the boy-who-won anymore. They did not comprehend his achievements. They did not see what they were supposed to be grateful about. The boy-who-won didn't look like he was winning against anything. Instead he became resentful and vengeful. He became morose and ill-tempered. He became consumed in his mad crusade against evil. In short, the boy-who-won became the boy-who-became.

This boy-who-became did not very much like this new title of his. There was nothing he could do though. He held no influence amongst higher channels, had no supporters who could vouch otherwise, and had no power to change public opinion. The boy-who-became became very much a more resented figure. It did not help that he did not look older than the day he became the boy-who-won. How could he not age in the decades beyond his teenage years? Was it the corrupting influence of the Hallows? Or was it due to some unspeakable ritual that required gallons of baby blood to maintain? Sadly for the boy-who-became, a significant portion of the public believed in the latter rumor.

It became inevitable that the Wizarding World would turn against the boy-who-became.

The boy-who-became was the new dark lord. The boy-who-became would kill everyone. The boy-who-became was planning to topple the entirety of the Wizarding World.

Of course, this could not be. So the Wizarding World moved to eliminate this newfound threat.

That was when the Wizarding World was rather rudely reminded why the boy-who-became used to be the boy-who-won. There was no possibility of defeating him in open combat. Add to that his wealth of experience in dealing with ruthless warlocks, the boy-who-became was nigh invincible.

How could you defeat an opponent who was formidable, experienced, and (reputably) immortal? The world's greatest Wizards shut themselves in a hidden location to ponder upon the question for days upon days.

Eventually it was decided to imprison the boy-who-became.

Fashioning an elaborate trap requiring countless magical materials and a humongous amount of magical energies, the wizards and witches finally finished crafting the ultimate prison after a modest period of ten years.

Ten years was enough to demolish much of the Wizarding World. Banks, shops, infrastructure, even Hogwarts itself was obliterated. Whole species such as dragons and even the innocent kneazels were made extinct. If the war raged just ten years more, the boy-who-became would become the boy-who-won once more. There would of course be no room for the loser to exist. The very future of the Wizarding World was at stake.

Thus, to provide the ultimate lure for their bloodthirsty opponent, they gathered most of the most powerful wizards and witches to the ruins formerly known as Hogwarts, and waited.

The boy-who-became couldn't resist. He came alright, spells blazing and killing a third of those present in the first few seconds. The angry and hateful boy-who-became killed indiscriminately. Young or old, rich or poor, it mattered none. All he saw was magic, and all he

wanted was to kill magic. For that tense short battle, the boy-who-became truly lived up to his other title, the Master of Death.

Unfortunately, there are ways to defeat someone without resorting to death. Utilizing the power of time, the permanence of reality, the remaining magicians cast a brief but powerful net that ensnared their chosen prey, and launched him into the prison that they fashioned only for him. The boy-who-became became entrapped in a prison that he could never have conceived in his life.

The boy-who-became became the boy-who-lost.

For a third time, the Wizarding World rejoiced, only with much less voices and much less enthusiasm. Fatigued and demoralized, the ruined survivors could only look on as the crystalline prison continued to mock their weary eyes.

They had to get rid of the boy-who-lost.

Much debate ensued how to accomplish such a goal without leaving open the possibility of an eventual return. After all, the boy-who-lost was the most dangerous and powerful enemy to ever threaten their society. Who ensured he could not return to deal the deathblow to the already fragile world of wizards and witches?

Send him out to the void of stars. At least, that was one of the suggestions. But as the muggleborns became aware of the advances in technology, in particular the growing forays into space, they began to reason more loudly for this option. How could this dreaded boy-who-lost ever become a threat in the coldness of vacuum, the void where air itself was but a distant fantasy? How could he maintain his existence in an environment that was subjected to lethal doses of radiation and temperatures as hot as the sun? Send him away, to the distant void, to never return.

Thus it came to be that his prison was transported to one of the many launch sites that the muggles used to throw oversized rockets into space. The mission that the crystalline structure would be attached to was carefully selected. This mission was chosen to explore the dwarf planet known as Pluto, a celestial body light-hours away from the Earth. Not that most wizards knew what light-hours represented. "It takes time for light to arrive to its destination? Perhaps there's a spell to speed that up."

Unconcerned, most of the survivors went along with the plan, attaching the crystal to the body of the satellite and making it undetectable to even the most careful of scrutinizers. Notice-me-nots and many other minor enchantments ensured that none would care to remove the magical contraption. To be absolutely certain the prison of the boy-who-lost would not be tampered with, a permanent presence of seven wizards stood vigil over the satellite every night and day until the launch date itself.

Thus, when the satellite eventually launched from the surface of their meager world, the Wizarding World rejoiced for one, final time. The boy-who-lost eventually became the boy-who-left.

There was only one problem. The boy-who-left took something with him in his journey. Something important.

It started when unicorns and other magical creatures grew weak and sick. Then spells began to fail or lose potency. Crucial wards expired, prompting a mad scramble to recast them only to see them fail again. Whole sections of the Wizarding World became exposed to the other world. The panicking wizard and witches moved quickly to eliminate whatever magical oddities the wards had hid, whether they be magical forests or the recently rebuilt goblin banks. The goblins themselves did not take kindly to this, but they were so few in number that it was child's play to exterminate this greedy race.

However, all they were doing is putting out the fires. Fires that burned more of themselves, weakening them piece by piece. It was eventually discovered that magic itself was failing.

How? Why? Many have taken the time to ponder this question, only to come up with one rather implausible conclusion. This whole incident began when the boy-who-left had left the domain of the Earth. Was his very existence tied to the survival of magic? Madness! Blasphemy!

More research yielded a more plausible, if less reassuring theory. It was noted in the most ancient annals that the power to wield magic was gifted by the race of dragons. It could be surmised that perhaps they were the source of magic as well. With the extinction of their entire race in the long conflict to defeat the boy-who-left, the wellspring of magic was erased, leaving no other source to replenish

the ambient magic that was continually used up by the remaining wizards and witches.

This theory did not hold entirely up. Dragons became extinct fifteen years before the boy-who-left was sent away from their planet. Did it take that much time for the ambient magic to be noticeably used up? Implausible.

Whatever the truth, it was somehow believed that the departure of the boy-who-left was the cause of the impending doom of magic as they knew it. A final revenge to the society that scorned the boy-who-left. A fitting measure, some believed. Others, well, they were not as accepting of their eventual fate.

Thus a few remaining handful strove to retrieve the satellite bearing the crystalline prison that held their potential savior. Of course, these remaining old coots and wrinkled hags did not know the first thing about projecting their weakened magic to a space that was measured in light-hours and astronomical units. They could not conceive with their brilliant but feeble minds to overcome the gulf that separated them from their target. After many tries and sacrifices, they eventually had to concede that they failed. The boy-who-left had won in the end.

Thus, this simple tale ends here, chronicling the decline and fall of the great civilization that was known as the Wizarding World. Amongst the ruins of our once marvelous society, I, a humble scribe and a squib possessing only the most modest amount of magic, cannot do anything else but concede to our savior-turned-villain that we were wrong.

Let me, as a final ode to the boy-who-lived-who-won-who-became-who-lost-and-who-left, inscribe this inadequate epitaph on the ruins of this once great and famous school.

We existed

We protected

We made a mistake

Please forgive us

—Professor Draco Malfoy, 2108.

End Notes: Kind of short, I know. The pace of this fic will be fairly quick, quicker than my usual glacial pace at least. The next update should come out soon.

Also, do not hesitate to comment, review or flame me. Feedback of any kind is appreciated, especially the negative kind since it shows what people really think about my fic but are afraid to speak up. Unlike certain egomaniac authors who think they are gods on earth, I am well versed in the value of constructive and unconstructive criticism, having dished out plenty of both to other authors. I find it nothing less than deserving to receive the same kind of abuse in return. Nothing you can throw at me can break me or snap my temper. So by all means, if you encountered something you don't like, let me know!

Btw, just to make this clear: THIS FIC IS NOT A CROSSOVER OF ANYTHING! THE SCI-FI UNIVERSE THAT THIS FIC TAKES PLACE IN IS COMPLETELY MADE UP BY MYSELF!

The First Subjects

Rape and pillage, that was what the boy-who-became had subjected to the Wizarding World. Why should he care about his actions when the rest of his society did not do so in return? Reciprocity was such an easy to understand concept. You respect me, I respect you. Sadly, the regressive and reactionary people that made up the Wizarding World was all but lacking in civilized conduct. Rules, laws and customs were thrown to the dust as wizards dark and light started to go after him and his precious ones. The brutal rape and murder of his wife was but the first sign of what was to become of the both of them. Man's greed was capable of pushing people to unspeakable lengths into the abyss. Was it any surprise that it would gaze back at you?

It started so small in the beginning. Hunting down the handful of warlocks responsible for the murder of his wife, Harry was engulfed more in grief than in madness. He took care to be discrete, to leave few traces behind and to dispatch his opponents cleanly and without exaggerated flourish.

But as the elimination of his relatives and friends went on, Harry began to disregard a few of these civilized conventions. Grief, rage, anger and madness consumed him evermore as he stopped bothering to think how his actions would be perceived by the rest of the Wizarding World. He began to torture and execute wrongdoers with horrendously dark spells. He raided his victim's belongings and spell books to gain more knowledge and power, to better dispatch his enemies of course. Slowly but surely, the hunt was all that mattered, leaving the weak and pitiful ideal known as justice behind in his path for ultimate revenge.

He began to take pleasure in the screams of the dying. So what? It wasn't as if violating human rights was something he needed to avoid. After all, if his enemies didn't bother to adhere to any rules, why should he?

He also took pleasure in beating, raping and suffocating dark witches. Is that so surprising? They were practically there for the taking! It wasn't his fault that these babes in robes decided to dedicate themselves to a life of crime and death. They must have done something worse somewhere earlier in their lives to deserve this treatment. Besides, it was such a waste killing these lovely

witches without.. using them up first. Heck, Harry would have gone mad if he wouldn't be able to relieve his urges once in a while. Even if his latest victim with that oh-so-delectable bust was only guilty of stealing a toy from a small-time shop when she was six...

What really set people off though was his desecration of the dead. If everyone wanted the Hallows so much, it would have been a waste not to use them to the fullest. Summoning the dead and compelling them to tell the boy-who-became their secrets was much easier than torturing the information out of them. That was not to say he would neglect to torture them. He would simply enjoy the torture for the sake of torture, and when the victim finally expired, he would raise them back from the dead and get back to business. Who cared about right or wrong when the dead didn't object to his methods? What a fuss people kicked up when they realized they couldn't take any secrets to their grave. From past dealings with dark lords, to long-forgotten sins that should never have been unearthed, it was surprising what most former heroes had hidden from the wider world.

Perhaps it wasn't such a great idea to raise Professor Dumbledore himself and make the old ghost reveal all of his nasty dealings. He sure had plenty of them in his long, fulfilling life. At least Harry got off a few cheap laughs out of the few modest double dealings Dumbledore had committed. All for the 'Greater Good' of course and nothing less what other figures of authority would have done. That it absolutely broke the back of the few remaining advocates for him was a minor consequence.

What those pathetic losers that made up the corpse known as the Wizarding World eventually did was rather more than he expected. Harry had already given up on the World and was well on his way with engineering their ultimate destruction. To think they would figure out a way to trap him and bind his magic to silence was a gross incompetence he would never forgive himself.

'So much time has passed...'

There was no possible way to track the time in his timeless prison. The interior was blue, the exterior was dark. Nothing moved, nothing showed, nothing changed. In some strange and inhuman passage the prisoner drifted from sleep to drowsiness back to sleep.

In the few moments when he was lucid enough to think, the boy-who-left was able to stretch out his diminishing magic and analyze the nature of his prison.

It was basically a spell container stacked with layers of layers of self-maintaining wards and charms and whatever other enchantments. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands of different spells, all of which were fed by one primordial master spell.

He could not find a name for it. He could only describe how it worked.

The Spell drew energy upon every action, every magic and even every thought. The more energy Harry expended on anything, the more the crystal's many spells were fed by the vampiric nature of the Spell. The crystal drew its energy both from its prisoner and from any outside influence, insuring that none would succeed in freeing him from the outside.

It was an incredibly ingenious construction and impervious to almost all attempts at breaking it apart. But Harry found a weakness. He didn't live to become the Master of Death in order to waste away his life to the death of the universe.

The crystalline prison was meant to keep him inside, and to feed itself from any attempts he would make to escape.

Thus, the first action he had to take was to change his intent, accepting the reason why he was imprisoned. The spells worked on his emotions and intentions, drawing instructions from the changing situation. By signaling to his inanimate captors that he did not plan to expend any energy in attempting a futile escape, the Spell would therefore be less eager to draw out his magic.

After decades of minute probes, Harry had finally found out the level of energy that could be expended at a certain rate before the Spell would finally kick in. And by keeping his mind empty with nothing else but acceptance of his fate, he could slowly and steadily increase that threshold. Therefore, the amount of magical energy he could spend to sabotage his prison would rise to an ever-faster rate.

In his inordinate amount of time being trapped, Harry had begun to patiently chafe at his wards, weakening them to the point of fracture

but never breaking them completely. The binding of warnings and alarms would kick up a huge storm if it detected any malfunctioning ward. No, the best Harry could hope for was to chip away at the edges of each ward so that they might break when Harry would next make his ultimate escape.

His prison began to rot from within. It might take a few centuries or millennia, but he would get out eventually.

That is, until some dweeb found his crystal from the surface of an undisturbed asteroid orbiting Jupiter. Harry first sensed very little, and dared not extend his senses for fear of tripping up the wards. Light, movement, warmth; it all came back to him, filtered through the thick defenses of his prison. Then he was deposited in a room which was predominately white, and energy began to assault the barriers of his cage.

'The idiots! They're pouring watts of energy into the Spell! If this keeps on my work gets set back for centuries!'

The time for patience was over. Harry had to gather himself to make his strike now, when he really felt he was only two-thirds finished with his job.

He began to draw in himself, focusing his energy into a point smaller than a pea.

"This is the captain speaking..."

As alarms and panic engulfed the room around him, Harry continued to compress his magical reserves.

"...take out a few of those scum with us!"

When a loud explosion kicked in the distance, and machines started to discharge their deadly energies, the boy-who-left weaved the element of his return.

"Keep the surgical beams from overheating! If they blow we won't have anything left to penetrate their armor!"

Deaths began to pass, their dying screams and fading souls granting welcome sustenance to the starved and exhausted prisoner.

He used their primal fears and their last regrets to put urgency in the strike that he was about to unleash.

"We surrender! Don't kill us!"

BOOM!

The crystal disintegrated in one of the largest and most contained magical explosions. The energy rivaled that of matter annihilation, a scale of detonation inconceivable by the original designers of the prison. In fact, only half of the total energy was spent on demolishing the bindings that made up the crystal. The other half was put into a shield that ensured that the explosion was contained in its most effective use. It also prevented the blast from destroying his body.

The first thing that struck him was the air. Fresh, if somewhat clinically scrubbed air. It was dryer, warmer, but comfortably breathable. Inhaling once, the boy-who-left took in the smells. Chemicals, dust, smoke, and blood. Ah, blood, a familiar companion in his quest to destroy the Wizarding World. He opened his crusted eyes for the first time in centuries to take in the view.

The wizard knew that he had been launched into space and was only recently retrieved. From the futuristic interior of the lab room and the notable absence of windows, he could be sure he was on an actual space ship. Questions immediately followed his observation. How far was he from his native planet? How advanced were the space ships of today?

Most of all, he wanted to know how long he slept.

Ignoring the corpses, the dying, and the injured, he turned towards the nearest person. He was of Asian heritage and wore a stylish white lab coat that glowed with several indecipherable codes around its surface. The man was absolutely gaping at his sudden appearance, as are the rest of the people present.

Was it something on his face? His scar wasn't that noticeable. Perhaps it was his fashion? His black-and-crimson combat robes were utilitarian and designed to fit into the twenty-first century muggle society. In fact, they were hardly robes to at all, and were more akin to trench coats the way it was cut at the moment, although weaved out of dragonskin instead of more mundane

materials. Although computerized garments adorned with flowing numbers and phrases seemed to be the current style, the basic shapes were essentially the same.

Maybe it was just his sudden entry. He couldn't help but smirk as he extended his minor empathic senses to the localized pool of dark emotions. He absorbed the fear and despair like a junkie taking a shot of cocaine. The incredible high he experienced was almost overwhelming.

Smirking wider, he opened his eyes again and addressed the Asian professor, hoping English was still in currency at this age. "Where am I?"

The guy was speechless. He could only stare wide-eyed at the remaining fragments of the crystal before darting back to the illuminant green eyes of this boy. "Y-You don't know? We're in the middle of the Jupiter belt, on board of a research vessel."

'Hmm. Jupiter implies that I'm in the same solar system. That's a relief. It also confirms that I'm on a space ship, as crazy as it might sound.'

"What is the current year?" This was what he really wanted to know. How far ahead in time was he really? Since the fashion and equipment didn't seem too outlandish, he figured it might have been only a few hundred years at the most.

The Asian researcher darted his eyes to colleagues, as if hoping for reassurance. "My boy.. young man.. the standard year is Anno Domini 3011. In the Gregorian Calendar. It doesn't differ much from the Julian Calendar if you're familiar with that. Is this.. to your satisfaction?"

Fucking. Blimey. Hell.

Nine hundred years.

Nine FUCKING hundred years.

A blast of ambient magic radiated from his form as his anger got the best of him. "Satisfaction? SATISFACTION? Fuck no it isn't! Nine Merlin-damned years! Gone! Wasted!"

"Hey, dumbass!" One of the armored boarders spoke up, aiming his pulse rifle at the released prisoner. "I don't know what you're doing with that glowy stuff, but if you don't shut it in three seconds I'm gonna shoot you apart!"

Flicking his palm, his deathstick instantly appeared between his fingers. He silently cast layers and layers of advanced protection wards on himself while he measured this new threat. Though the weaponry was unfamiliar to him – and thus a potential danger to his life, he largely found his adversary wanting.

"It's been three seconds already. Are you going to shoot me already or do they count seconds differently in this age?"

The man promptly fired with his rifle, spitting out a rapid cycle of purple beams. Harry's defenses held up, as he had predicted, although the power output was significantly higher than he was used to from regular combat spells.

"Jeez, what are you, The Wizard of Pluto or something!" The man spat out in frustration and dropped his rifle for his sidearm.

The compact gun spat out needles of armor-piercing material, which flattened uselessly against the kinetic barrier. "Fuck! Let's see you eat this then!"

The grenade that the man threw in a hurry flew comically slow towards the unconcerned wizard. The device bumped harmlessly against his kinetic wards, and promptly exploded in electric fury.

This time, Harry did stumble, finding half his wards had been fried apart. "What the—"

But his opponent was already on top of him, having used the distraction to unsheathe his wrist-mounted combat blades and storm the wizard in a mighty body slam. This time there were no kinetic barriers to repel the attacker.

The two crashed against the sterile white floor with bone-breaking force, knocking the wind out of Harry. If his robe's enchantments didn't hold up, he might have succumbed to the incredible weight of his attacker's semi-powered armor. As it was, the knives that stung

brutally against Harry's midsection were threatening to pierce his robes, dragonskin or not. His enraged attacker took the opportunity to bash Harry's head with his elbow, causing a bloody nose and a bruised eye.

"ENOUGH! Elcutis Proximita!"

As soon as the incantation was spoken, his opponent was flung away, only to crash against the ceiling and drop back to the floor with a cracking neck-snapping thud. The surreal event seemed to snap the rest of the boarders.

One of the two female attackers snapped out a command. "Cut down the rest and kill the boy! Use any nEMP weaponry you have on him!"

'Fuck.'

The reddish dyed boarders let their rifles rip at the people in lab coats, hitting those who were foolish enough to emerge out of cover. The scientists didn't stand still for long and used their modified lab equipment to fire heat and radiation back at their opponents, who seemed mostly unaffected by the flea bites. A few of the attackers had discarded their rifles and brought out their nEMP armaments.

One man retrieved a handful of the same type of grenades that were thrown earlier. Recognizing the acute threat, Harry snapped his wand tip and fired a soundless Reducto, which caused the payload to detonate in the pirate's face and overload his entire suit. The other attacker seemed to have loaded an nEMP magazine in his pistol and had already fired his first few rounds at Harry. The wizard let the rounds veer away from his direction, courtesy of an overcharged shield charm that was meant to bend away arrows. With a calm flourish of his deathstick, Harry sliced in the air in front of him, incanting, "Sectumsempra."

The pistol, its attached arm, and the rest of the pirate's torso slid apart in two separate pieces.

With unassuming calm, Harry noted the fear etched in the faces of the helmeted aggressors as they turned their arms to face what they perceived as the greater threat.

Harry would have none of this nonsense go any further.

Waving both his wand hand and his unoccupied one in the air, the master wizard boomed, "Expelliarmus Magnus!"

A shockwave expanded from Harry's form, spreading out in the entire lab room, flinging rifles and lab fixtures from gripping hands and bolted platforms alike. The objects did more than detach themselves from their owners however, and broke apart under the strain of gravitational forces acting upon the objects. Broken components and deformed metal was all that was left of the weaponry when they landed. Even the grenades and the hidden knives embedded within the boarding armor had been warped into uselessness.

When the boarders snapped out of the surprise of seeing all their weapons ripped away from their grasp, one of them started to rush at Harry himself, mindless of the lack of arms. The other aggressors started to follow their teammate in closing down the range.

"Oh no you don't boys." And with another lazy swoop of his wand, the metallic floor beneath the pirates liquefied. Arm-like shapes emerged to grab the men and women in red, holding them in their place.

Seeing as he got everyone's attention again, he healed the superficial damage to his face and asked, "Now, my dear children, can anyone explain what the heck is going on?"

"Honored man, if I may?" Zhang spoke up first, realizing the importance of swaying this scientific oddity against the murderous pirates. Harry motioned the professor to continue. The man succinctly summed up the situation in his perspective and painted the attackers in as worse a light as possible.

While the story did sound plausible to Harry, though he was never a talent in Legilimens like Dumbledore or Voldemort. Only with great practice with an obscure Tibetan ritual was he able to develop limited empathic ability, and he could never utilize it without making the other person aware of his probes. Fear of death was one exception though, and the man was practically doused in the smell. It was clear there was no lie in his statements.

Turning from the cowering lab rats to the obvious aggressors added up further evidence of his suspicions. The raiders didn't bother to hide their emotions. Their bloodlust remained, only tempered by the frustration that their arms were taken away and their legs held into place.

The dark-haired female was speaking avidly into her comm, relaying their emergency.

'That wouldn't do.'

With another tiny flick of his wand, the helmets ripped off from everyone's head, exposing their faces to the lone wizard. The eye contact he held with each of them further aided in gauging their intentions.

It didn't hurt to hear their side of the story though. "What do you have to say for yourselves?"

A short pause followed, before one of them lost their temper. "Even if you kill every one of us here, the cap'n will just blow up the entire ship. Let's see you escape that!"

That might pose a small problem, Harry surmised, but he hadn't been sitting idle inside the crystal for centuries without coming up with new spells to keep him alive in the cold of vacuum.

"The captain's going to love raping that tight little ass of yours you freak!" One of them jeered, a rough-faced fellow with a burn scar who was struggling to break free from the molded floor.

"What did you say?"

"I said, you dirty freak, that your virgin little asshole is gonna be—"

The man didn't finish his next words, for a tiny little beam impacted his face, melting the skin right off the surface of his skull. The utter viciousness of the spell caused a new wave of fear to roll over everyone present.

"Enough of this foolishness. I've already heard everything I needed to know and I've already decided what I will do next."

"Mr. Wizard, and that is...?"

Harry grinned darkly at the crowd, and announced, "I'm going to take over that lovely little pirate ship you have out there and have a fine smashing time tearing up the galaxy."

The objections everyone raised was deafening. Selner was particularly livid. How could this foreign being, this magician, actually intend to take up piracy? The boarders themselves were similarly astonished, though they wondered more on how this frea— weirdo would actually accomplish such a deed. Was there any limit to his magic?

"Look, if I'm going to make my mark on this world, I mean, universe, I got to start somewhere, right? What better than a ship made for fighting. I don't know about you guys, but this dump of a research ship is pretty much shot apart."

"But mister magician, please,"

"Harry."

"Excuse me?"

"My name is Harry. I assume that name hasn't gone out of style in this age?"

"Er..."

Professor Zhang took over from his intern. "Mr. Harry, while I appreciate your timely intervention, I would seriously advise you to think your future carefully. Your abilities are astounding. Your capabilities are a marvel of modern science. Engaging in barbaric acts of violence would not accomplish anything. If you would permit us to study your 'magic', we could set off a new age of all of mankind! Think of the fame and fortune you would be earning! Everyone must know of this discovery!"

The neutral stare the scientist received in return was more than a little worrying. "Everyone? Who says I want to be some kind of guinea pig for you to poke your needles in? Hell no. You gits ain't going to shove me into another prison."

Turning back to face the entire crowd, Harry made a sweeping statement. "I'm going to steal that big ship that's hanging out in space whether you all like it or not. The question is, will you join me?"

The request was so unexpected that it took a long silence for everyone to think the offer through. Harry didn't have all day though, so he started to approach the nearest raider.

"You. Are you willing to join my crew?"

"Go to hell you fucking ass donkey!"

"Suit yourself." Harry shrugged, and cast a point-blank Reducto against the man's chest. Blood, gore and armor fragments rained vicinity over the nearest people as the wizard approached his next target.

"Are you willing to SUBMIT to me or do I have to charm your guts to strangle your neck?"

The stocky woman was practically in tears as she frantically whispered, "Yes, yes! Whatever you say I'll do it! Just don't kill me!"

"A wise choice." Harry nodded approvingly, and held the tip of his wand against the lower bicep of the woman's right arm. "Just hold still. Nomen Artensien."

The woman cried softly as a searing pain buried against her skin. No one could see the mark that would forever mark her soul under the layers of her armor, but it was a variant of Voldemort's infamous Dark Mark. Harry rubbed his fingers over the burn mark, sending soothing charms over the pirate's skin.

"This will be my Mark, branding you as my vassal, slave, and possession. Dedicate your life to my will, and I will reward you with wealth and power. Fail in my expectations or betray my trust, and I will cut the strings that bind your life in this world."

"..Yes.. Master Harry.."

The self-invented spell was an interesting puzzle for Harry to occupy himself while he spent centuries coasting in space. Thinking over his mad rampage over the entire Wizarding World, the boy-who-became was an utterly foolish strategist. While he intended to destroy all magic and wipe away the society that scorned him, he had hardly ever thought of a coherent strategy to achieve such an objective. In the end, while he may have succeeded in bringing down the pillars that held up the Wizarding World, he had let himself vulnerable to an opening that leave him unable to enjoy the spoils. For one single man to fight against the whole world was an impossible task. He needed to have followers.

Therefore his own Dark Mark. He hadn't known if he would ever need the spell, but if he found himself in the position where he had to rely on others for some vital function he could not perform on his own, he would be sure to rely on a mechanism of control that could not be dispelled and allow a wide range of control for himself. While he did not have any knowledge of the workings of the Dark Mark, he had mentally reverse-engineered Voldemort's creation and fashioned one for himself with the incomplete knowledge of spellcrafting he had available in his mind.

With this tool in hand, he would be able to garner more power than he would have wielded alone. If there was one lesson that Harry had brutally learned in his lifetime on Earth, it was that Might made Right. Laws and customs were weak and too often trampled with if no one held enough power to enforce them. To ensure your own well-being, you had to be able to depend on your own powerbase. While he would have wanted to gather people who were less.. shabby, he supposed that these scumbag pirates would have to do for now.

So with pleasant haste he inducted the next of the pirates into his service, speaking out the same statement of claiming in full. It reinforced the gravity of his minion's newfound position, letting him and the others know that their hard work wouldn't go unrewarded. It would also warn them of the consequences should they do any funny business. Harry was well aware that people weren't house elves, and that if he treated people as kindly as Voldemort treated his Death Eaters, then he wouldn't get very far with his ambition. Even though Harry's methods and intentions were less than noble, he liked to think he was fair.

He came upon the last pirate, a hot piece of ass that wore a suit of armor that was distinctly flashier than what the others wore.

"You look different. Are you the leader of this bunch?"

The pirate lieutenant known as Claris had prepared herself for this confrontation. She had been carefully mulling over her responses to this strange, alien and incredibly powerful boy-wizard. All she cared was to survive the next day. If that meant handing over her allegiance to this maniac and risk a later death when Hargrave would shoot the Helical Visage apart, then so be it. It was better than dying immediately of a horrendous death like Jason endured from this wand-waving prat.

That did not mean of course that she would settle to being this man's penthouse pet. If she wished to salvage some of her dignity, she had to make it clear to this boy that she had more to offer than her body. She hoped this guy would not be ruled too much by his hormones, or she would be practically doomed.

"My Lord, Master Harry, my name is Claris, and I serve as the second in command to Captain Hargrave, the owner of the Eviscerator. Besides issuing orders, I serve on the bridge as the sensors and information officer. My talents are well appreciated by the captain, sir."

"Hmmm..." The dark wizard thought as he leered shamelessly over the officer's attractive body. His free hand slid over the curve of her ass, feeling up the shape of the mound despite the thick layer of armor that stood in the way. "I am sure your talents are well appreciated indeed..."

His eyes hardened immediately, losing the lustful suggestions it held before. Snapping his hand away from Claris' ass, he instead brought it up to the woman's neck, and squeezed. The frantic fear the woman radiated was as orgasmic as its sexual counterpart, and Harry was almost overwhelmed by the addictive sensation. He did bring himself back soon enough though, and eased on the pressure to allow the bitch to breathe. It wouldn't do to waste this fine booty before he had a trial.

"Look bitch, you don't look as stupid as the rest of the bunch, so maybe I'll give you a chance and be my assistant or whatever. But,

understand that you will have to serve me in your fullest capacity, and in any manner that I wish. Let even a single thought go through your mind that doesn't give me a leg up, and I will give you a death that will be far from painless and swift. Do. You. Understand?"

"..Yes.. I do.. I will comply.."

"Good. You shall henceforth become my Second, my prime lieutenant in my growing army." As Harry burned his Mark on her arm, he intoned a slightly different statement that would set her apart from the others. "This will be my Mark, branding you as my vassal, possession and agent. Dedicate your life to my will, and I will reward you with wealth, power and immortality. Fail my expectations or betray my trust, and I will obliterate your very soul, leaving you unable to pass on to the afterlife."

Having finished the induction of the pirates, the newly emerging dark lord dispelled the metallic arms that held his subjects in place. The three remaining survivors sighed in relief and retrieved their helmets, although the recently converted lieutenant quickly reminded herself of something troubling.

"Sir, Master, I apologize to inform you of this, but there are still at least seven other boarders on the ship." Seeing as Master Harry showed little comprehension, Claris continued nervously with, "One guarding the engine room, the rest sweeping up the hallways and bunks. Since I informed my captain and the leader of the other boarders of our situation here before I was.. inducted, they will be preparing a counter-attack on our position at any moment. They won't hesitate to use their heavier armaments, and we don't have any weapons left."

Looking at the broken weapons scattered over the floor, Harry was not that much worried. Though his magic had atrophied by a significant amount from the immense passage of time, he still knew a sizable repertoire of spells that would enable him to kill these muggles and stay alive even without air. The only worrying threat were those EMP attacks, which had a disconcertingly effective drain on his wards. Although he was confident he could eliminate the rest of the pests, he wasn't ready to risk himself out in the open before he was able to properly recover his strength.

No, better to send these three new recruits out for another test. Ready'ing his Elder Wand, he cast an intuitive set of spells that levitated random components that were robust enough to withstand the corrupting effect of magic, and enchanted them with a single, overpowering directive.

"Grant me three powerful weapons for my subjects."

The electronic parts twisted and turned, spinning around to place themselves into positions arranged to some greater design that fitted the individual pirate. The spell was a tricky one to cast, and was designed to create a working set of crossbows from scrap wood, not rifles that spat out lasers. Still, the framework behind the spell was universal and could work with any material, so long there was a sufficient variety of raw materials. The amazing amount of debris from the pirates' rifles combined with the broken pieces of lab equipment was more than enough to produce something deathly.

Both the man and the stocky woman received a rifle. They looked rather shabby and unique due to their haphazardly combined materials, but the wizard knew it would get the job done. For his lieutenant Harry had something slightly different in mind. A gleaming white pistol with elaborate blue crystal inlays floated in front of Claris, which she took with more than a little caution.

The warriors with the rifles checked their ammo counters, which Claris did for her own sidearm, only to come up to something puzzling. "Twenty-five hundred rounds?"

Nodding, Harry explained. "Your weapon works differently and is keyed to my magical core. As long as I'm close enough, your magazine will recharge."

"How close is close enough?"

"Heck if I know. Probably less than a kilometer though. Wouldn't want you to go off merr'ing around without my say so." He clapped his hands in expectation. "Well then my minions, I charge you now to take care of the vermin outside. Try to convince them to join you under my service, but if they won't budge, just kill them."

The thought of killing their friends and former comrades was not an easy choice to make, Harry knew. But if he wanted to be assured of their devotion, then this was the perfect test.

"You will not come to help us?" Claris asked, feeling a little naked at the thought of fighting a more experienced crew outnumbered. "We would not last long against Gerchev. He is incredibly tough."

"Remember what I said earlier. Do not fail my expectation of you." Harry reminded his Second firmly, locking eyes with each other. "I gave you an order; I expect you to comply. If you have it in your mind to avoid or shirk your duty in any way, I will know, and I will cut out your heart. Do not test me in this. I can snuff out your life whether you are next to me or on the other side of the ship. Clear?"

"Clear, sir, very clear." The female officer replied crestfallen, and motioned for her two subordinates to troop out of the ruined entrance.

What the three pirates didn't know that Harry had been surreptitiously casting wards over their forms. Besides the basic ones that negated extreme temperatures and blunted projectiles, he added an obscure anti-electrical ward designed by Tesla himself that would hopefully guard the other wards against the EMP. Harry had no idea if it would work or not, but if all three came back alive after completing this little task, then he would know if it was effective.

In the meanwhile, he had to decide what to do with the civilian researchers that have so far stayed silent in the matter.

"Well, what to do with you poor lot?"

End Notes: A quick update to set the story rolling.

Cat's Eye

The fortunes of vagrancy and war can shift from one direction to another. There was no such thing as consistent luck. Those who survived in the awful but lucrative trade of piracy did so by preparation and caution, not with mindless strength and courage. Even so, no one could predict all disrupting factors. Claris was well aware of the risks of the trade, and had always kept in the back of her mind the possibility of death.

But none of those thoughts were as bad as she was entertaining at this moment. To be spared from a strange and utterly impossible foe, only to be directed against her former comrades was a cruel fate. Not only was she and her fellow traitors outnumbered. There was still the matter of being on a disabled research vessel that were constantly eyed by two space superiority fighters and one heavily-armed mobile carrier. She knew that Captain Hargrave would be hesitant to pound the Helical Visage into scrap when some of his men were still alive, but as soon as he would lose contact with everyone of his boarders that would change. Without knowing anything about Harry's impressive but obscure powers, she would not risk putting her faith on his uncertain powers alone.

She gripped her gifted pistol tightly, feeling helpless on having to rely on such a strange and elegant weapon. This was not going the way she wanted.

Therefore, she needed to play a game of deception, but not before letting the others in. A small neural command established a private laser-linked channel, insuring that no one but Janis and Cleveland would receive her signals.

"Listen, I know that we're in a tight spot, but we need to figure out a way to kill all of Gerchev's boys without getting killed ourselves."

Cleveland, the only male left alive, did not look so afraid anymore now that he was out of the wizard's presence. "Let's just ditch these stupid guns and warn Gerchev—"

The man didn't get to finish his words as Claris slapped her palm against his helmet. "Don't be stupid! Haven't you seen that kid's power? He can easily kill everyone on board with his fucking magic. Besides, he made us swear an oath and burned us with whatever's

still stinging our arms. He might very well be listening in on us this very moment."

That brought the two back to wary caution.

"Clariss, you don't understand. I can't fight my friends." Janiss pleaded. "They're my buddies! And Gerchev, he took care of us all. I can't fight him, Clariss, please don't make me."

Having run out of patience, Clariss whipped up her gun and aimed the barrel straight against Janiss' transparent headplate. The girl looked paralyzed in disbelief while Cleveland brought up his own magically reassembled rifle against his boss.

"The fuck you doing?"

"Just THINK you guys." The female lieutenant bore down as she pressed her pistol harder against the plate. "Do you want to live? To survive this FUBAR-damned day?"

"Y-Yes!"

"Then who do you think offers the most protection? Gerchev or Harry? Which of them are going to win if they are going up against each other? Someone with a gun or a grenade, or someone with a pointy stick that can tear you apart, fling balls of exploding death, or can make the very floor you stand on your enemy?"

It took a while and a few more words to subdue and convince her subordinates. They were made clear that they would be ill advised to go against their new master. For better or worse, they had all cast their lot with the freaky bastard. The desire to survive this awful day overruled even the solid bonds of pride and loyalty. That didn't mean they wouldn't hesitate to put a bullet in their lifelong friends, but at least she was putting it out of their minds to change sides again.

Now to act on her plan. She authorized her comm helmet to reconnect to the Eviscerator's commandnet. "Clariss reporting in."

"What the hell happened, second? You dropped out of the net for five minutes and I'm not getting any life signs from three of your crew."

"It's bad, captain. The eggheads threw up some nasty shit out of their heavy duty equipment and got the jump on us. Requesting further assistance."

Gerchev predictably interjected with his crude mouth. "Fuck Claris, I knew I should have put a tighter leash on you! Three dead! Do you know how pissed off my mates are right now? I ought to strangle you myself, you airheaded bitch!"

"Control yourself!" Hargrave asserted himself on the net. "This is no time for divisions. Gerchev, take your men and clear out the laboratory. Claris, you stay back and cover their flanks. We'll deal with this disaster when the ship is secure. Captain out."

Now, with the lure in place, she and her fraying men could do nothing but prepare for their ambush. "Spread out the hallway and stand close to some cover. We shouldn't make Gerchev suspect us so don't point your guns at him at first."

"Are we going to kill them all, ma'm?"

Grimacing, she faced Janis and shook her head. "If we can disarm or force a few of them to surrender, then I'm all for it, but we have to make sure they're not a threat anymore. Kill the diehards first, the ones you know who won't hesitate to shoot all of us down. Okay?"

The woman nodded, allowing Claris to prepare her own actions. Why her new master gave her a pistol instead of a rifle she didn't know, although it was certainly a useful weapon in close quarters encounters. Too bad she didn't think of asking back her grenades and knives. Those were absences she would sorely miss.

Roman Gerchev was not a man to mess with. He grew up in the pirate business by having his first kill at eight. The taste of blood was so intoxicating to him then that he stayed on the boarding actions, even though he could have been promoted to some other ship duty. Working at gunnery bored him; all he did was point his turret at some indistinguishable dot in space. Working at engines or any other support function was tantamount to cowardice. Piloting fighters was a little more to his style, but he did not have the patience to study all the physics crap. Besides, in dogfights you couldn't smell the blood you spilled.

So instead he became the consummate raider marine, excelling in all forms of shipboard combat. He knew his way with every weapon, from pistols to rifles to flamethrowers. He studied tactics passed down from retired pirates, but accumulated most of his knowledge through sheer experience by throwing himself at the enemy over and over without rest. He had over a dozen of postings in his sixty years in the business, and he could hold up for a few decades more. His body might not be at its prime, but all the implants and replacement organs he saved up for in his entire career made him an increasingly resilient warrior.

Gerchev lived to fight, and he would be damned if he would pass away in some peaceful bed down planetside.

Even though he cared for nothing but battle, it did not mean he neglected his fellow boarders. Taking over ships was a team effort, and you had to trust on your comrades to pull you out of a tight spot. As Captain Hargrave's most senior boarder, he was their leader, and trained his men and women to take care of themselves in all situations. Injuries were commonplace, and deaths were unavoidable, but even he wouldn't be incompetent enough to lose three experienced raiders to a bunch of eggheads with a few oversized toys!

Something must have seriously gone terribly wrong, and Gerchev was about to find out. Captain's orders or not, if he found out that sassy bitch Claris was at fault, he would blow her brains out in an instant.

As he and his party rounded the corner, he was met with the sight of scattered debris. His rifle immediately trained on the closest figure, who was eventually revealed to be Claris herself. Unconcerned with any other details, he stomped over to her position keeping his rifle pointed towards the woman. Evidently, she lost her rifle, having only her sidearm ready.

"What do you have to say for yourself?"

The woman had the gall to shrug at him. "As I told the Captain, they've fortified themselves using modified lab equipment. There's no other entrance in that room, and it would take heavy equipment and a lot of time to drill through the bulkheads."

After ordering his men to spread out and assess the situation themselves, he turned back to Claris.

"Me and my boys will take care of the holdouts. I don't want you anywhere near us when we go and clean them up."

"Yessir."

Gerchev could deal with Claris' incompetence later. He had a job to do first. After having his subordinates report their observations and describe the positioning of the rebels, he made up a small plan and readied his men for a charge.

Two of his point men were readying their pulse grenades. Three, two,

"Do it now! FIRE!"

Twin beams of iridescent green tore at the two grenade throwers from behind. They burned against the grenades, detonating one of them in their midst and jarring everyone from their positions. Before Gerchev could recover, he saw Claris behind him taking aim at his head. Just as the pistol fired, he rolled out of the way and pure technologically enhanced reflexes made him train his own weapon on that treacherous bitch. The bolt of what looked like plasma travelled swiftly from her surprisingly powerful weapon and washed right over the poor grunt behind him, dousing his armor in molten heat and leftover electric potential.

"What in the seven hells are you doing Claris!"

The female traitor snapped out in surprise of the power of her own weapon and spat out another devastating shot at him. It forced him to roll away, letting the plasma melt through the floor panels.

A plasma weapon of such power would burn through his Class II armor in one or two shots. In turn, that meant that its compact battery charge wouldn't last very long. All he had to do was to survive the next few shots and he would be free to take this sanctimonious whore down.

His other men weren't faring as well. Two were already down and the rest were still shaken up. Ricky fired a full burst at Janis, but

somehow her armor held up miraculously against the barrage with her pitiful Class I armor. Panic set in on the pressured traitor, and she fired her own weapon in practically every direction. The full beam of weaponised heat and light cut the tiny distance with the speed of light and tore the ankles out of Ricky, tripping him in a bloody mess. Janis finished the job by burning his face on the way back.

Cleveland in the meanwhile was holding himself calm. He hid himself behind a fragment of the blast-out door, secure in the comfort that the pulse rifles wouldn't be able to penetrate his cover. Still, he had to watch out for grenades, so when a short pause set in he darted forwards, using his newly improved rifle to cut a beam straight through the bulkhead corner where his two former comrades were hiding behind. The powerful weapon took a scant few seconds to burn through, but when it did it took out the shoulder of one opponent and clipped the other in the side. As he turned fully round the corner to finish the two off, an nEMP grenade set in proximity mode burst from his feet, blasting his entire body back and washing him over with electrically charged energy.

Gerchev was growing tired. A spray of plasma had landed on his boot a minute ago, burning through the thinner layer of metals and melting down a portion of the skin to the bone. He had been weaving back into the bowels of the ship, luring Claris from the larger engagement in order to finish her off alone when he was in a more advantageous terrain.

The problem was that the damned blasted plasma pistol didn't seem to run out of juice! He counted at least fifteen shots, and the traitor didn't seem the least concerned with conserving her shots. There was also never any moment when she needed to reload. Every time he thought the pistol ran out, he was faced with yet another sickly blue glob.

"Where did you get that frikkin' new gun? Was it from the eggheads?"

"You wouldn't understand, old man."

"Try me."

Rounding towards the mess hall, Gerchev lifted up one of the sturdy tables with the strength of his arm boosters and threw it straight at Claris when she stormed in. Predictably, she shot at the incoming furniture, but that didn't help her at all when the remainder of the melting piece knocked her off her feet.

'Idiot. She of all should know that plasma bolts have comparably little kinetic energy. Throw a rock at it, and the stone would bulldoze through.'

His rifle spat out laser pulses, which did nothing much except chinking his opponent's armor. The impacts would jar her nonetheless, giving him ample opportunity to close in for the kill. He sprinted down the distance and changed the setting of his rifle so that a pair of bayonets would slide out from both sides of his rectangular barrel. With a mighty exertion he lunged at the stirring officer, hoping to impale her very guts.

Instead, he crashed against some kind of invisible barrier that shimmered like a bubble around his target. Some kind of rune appeared in the air and glowed in flickering fire. Suddenly, it flashed, unleashing a small flaming impact that threw him to the other side of the cafeteria.

Landing hard, Gerchev tried to get back up to his feet, only to find that the plasma that had burned through his foot had burned up his leg as well. Finding himself back prone, he tried to crawl under some cover. When that didn't quite work out he cursed, put down his rifle, and tried to retrieve a pair of grenades from his belt.

"You wouldn't understand, Gerchev, because you can't conceive of the greater power that I'm serving under now."

Turning to look at his opponent, he could see that Claris had somehow budged aside the debris and gained a clear shot at him. Terror graced his face for the first time in years as he saw the smoking gunbarrel calmly point at his direction.

"Not like this!"

Death's release came swiftly for him.

In the end, there were only two survivors. Both were wounded by burns but had been mercifully knocked out. Their internal AI's had already injected painkillers and other medicines as their damaged suits adjusted to the injuries.

There were still two other survivors left, one guarding the engine room and the other looking over the bridge. Claris had ordered both her subordinates to take them out, but alive if possible. Hopefully their intended victims would not realize the changed allegiances, allowing Cleveland and Janis to get the drop on them. They needed the firepower.

Word came back from both in a few minutes that they took care of their charges. It was time to report her results.

Her new lord was smirking when he noticed her arrival. Trying hard not to let her show her fear, she stepped up and gave a quick salute. "We've completed our task, Master Harry. Four survivors, the rest are dead. There are no more interlopers on the ship, although we have not secured any controls."

"Good work, my Second. Did you restrain the survivors?"

The lieutenant nodded.

"Very well." Turning back to the Asian professor and his colleagues and pointing his wand at them, he stated, "We'll have to continue our little conversation for another time. Sit tight and don't try anything funny. Incarcerous."

Ropes appeared out of nowhere, binding every civilian in place. Gauging the chaos and discarded weaponry around him, Harry decided to add some further security and conjured up an iron cage around the scientists.

"That should keep you all in place."

Turning back to his subordinate, he ordered, "Follow me."

They exited the room, leaving the poor sods in their bindings. Harry led the way as if he was totally unconcerned by the possibility that Claris would shoot him in the back. With all the power he flaunted

about, she wasn't surprised if he could stop the plasma bolt in its track – and turn it right back at her face.

Heck knows how this weird shit works. Magic came from the realm of fairy tales and fantasy. Reality wasn't supposed to include the ability to cut through Class II armor with an elaborate wave of a stick. Still, the evidence was all there before her. Unless she was still asleep and stuck in some stupid simulation, she had to accept what she saw right in front of her eyes was actually true.

The effectiveness of her plasma pistol alone was enough to reaffirm her conviction in the power of Harry's might. No other weapon could contain so much power in such a small and light package. Claris was well aware of the holy trinity of weapons development: balancing power, capacity, and volume. A weapon the size of a hovercar could pack a mean punch, and have the capacity to fire plenty of volleys, but it wouldn't get smuggled past any weapons inspections. If you wanted to benefit from a small package, you had to sacrifice either power or capacity. Not so with her personal sidearm.

The pirate had a feeling that she was only skimming the surface of Harry's potential. A small hope flickered in her heart. Perhaps this boy would become something great one day. If that day comes, she would stand beside him as his Second, gaining privileges she could not dare imagine she would be enjoying under stuffy old Hargrave.

The young wizard lead her through a few corners, confident that he knew the way. Eventually he opened a random door and entered the room, motioning her to follow him in. The space inside turned out to be the observation deck. Reinforced transparent plastics showed a space that was largely black and indecipherable, but showed a hint of the asteroid belt against the backdrop of the giant known as Jupiter.

Most civilian ships contained such flauntingly open observation decks. They were serious vulnerabilities in any battle or other types of emergencies, but then again, the research vessel was never meant to be thrown into danger in the first place. Still, actually entering this deck while enemies were still hovering about was tantamount to suicide. She really couldn't understand what her new master was up to. Did he needed to see the open space for himself?

Indeed, Harry was utterly entranced by the view. "So we're really out in space."

The kid was gaping at the view like he was an actual kid. Claris restrained the urge to smack him back to sense. Instead, she decided to try to speak up. "Sir?"

"Yes, Second?"

"Forgive me for intruding in your moment, but we are still under siege."

"..Ah, you mean that 'mobile carrier' of yours." The kid nodded and peered out the viewglass, trying to spot the ship with his naked eye. "Where is it? Can you point it out for me?"

The pirate officer coughed embarrassingly. "The mothership is hundred kilometers away, and its silhouette will be indistinguishable from the black of space. The interceptors are closer but they will also be hard to spot."

"Hmm.. if I can't spot my targets, I don't bloody well know where to send a Reductor curse.. Is there any way you can find out where they are? Even an image is okay if you can't manage anything better."

"Well," She thought the issue over for a moment. "If I tap myself back in the commandnet, I can request a real-time overview of the local battlespace. Hargrave will grow suspicious though, so I can't stay connected for long. We don't have much time at all to be honest. Gerchev likes to stay off the commandnet to prevent any eavesdropping, but he always signs in regularly just to let Hargrave know he's alive. Now that he's dead..."

"Right. Well, I think I can figure something out. Not very pleasant, but it gets the job done." He muttered. "Would you please take off your glove?"

She unlocked the clamps holding her gauntlet in place and revealed her hand out in the open. Harry's scarred hands took it immediately. Retrieving an archaic looking ritual dagger, the boy cut a small line from her thumb, letting the drops fall against the surface of the cool dark floor.

"Arnaeis Carnifex Felitas."

The growing pool of blood began to stir. Unholy fumes flowed around the liquid, their elegance spiraling around like sharks circling a prey. The pool bubbled and heated up, frightening the only non-wizard present. That was her blood that was going through something weird. Eventually, the bubbling stopped, as if it was finished sucking out everything of value from her blood.

The blood solidified itself, turning into a red-shaded mirror. She was suddenly looking into Harry's eyes, and for a tiny moment she felt completely exposed. The pressure was so great that she quickly averted her head, hoping her new boss wouldn't hold it against her.

"I need you to look in the mirror."

"What? Why?"

"Just look in the bloody pool!"

She obeyed, not wanting to irritate her master. This time she wasn't facing the wizard's eyes. It was a small relief. Instead, the vision showing up in the pool was something incomprehensible. Mist, static and indecipherable patterns flowed past her view, all in a backdrop of mute grey. It was like watching a blocked signal. What was she suppose to see in this?

Harry approached from behind and put both of his hands over her shoulders. The pressure was firm, and she could feel some sort of glow radiating from the palms.

"Now, think back on those two fighters." He began hypnotically. "Imagine their shapes. What were their colors? What kind of weapons did it bear? Think on their capabilities. Think how hard it must be to pilot them. Try to recall who the pilots are, and what you know about them. Imagine the fighters streaking out in space. Can you visualize them? Can you see them?"

The female raider tried as best she could. With the subtle encouragement of her master, her consciousness slowly lifted away from her mortal limitations. It wasn't just about the pool; her entire perception of the world around her shifted in such a subtle fashion

that she was hardly surprised when her presence expanded beyond the space ship known as the Helical Visage.

Two tiny glows buzzed at the edge of her vision. She turned to them, opposite though they were positioned against their prey. The two Steinfeldt-class interceptors patrolled their designated zones with the ease of accustomed supremacy. Their Vulcan railguns contained enough of a punch to rip through the flimsy civilian-grade hull armor, and if that wasn't sufficient, their anti-ship missiles would demolish anything in their path. With such an obscure prey all the way out in this Jupiter backwater, the odds that someone else would interrupt their raiding party was virtually nil. Nothing could threaten their dominion over this tiny pocket of space.

No, that wasn't true. A predator was in their midst and was just about to pounce them both. How easy it was for the hunter to become the hunted.

Something pushed against her back. Something heavy, but insubstantial. Claris tried to resist, but Harry said to open herself to his will.

So she did.

So she received.

So she absorbed.

I have become you, and you have become I. Let us dance together under the moon in the presence of the eye of cats.

Iridescent eyes gazed over the flies with lazy contempt. Who were these simpletons to strut around like arrogant purebloods. Pests! Vermin! Dirt! The confidence they accumulated over a hundred easy victories had made these pilots slow and fat. To whom do they expect to measure up against? An overweight kneazel? A featherless owl? The Avatar of Death stooped down to judge their contentious lives, and found them sorely lacking. Those weak of heart and ill in mind deserved the fortune that would overcome them soon. The ward of life glowed too dim to stop his infamous advance.

Perfect.

"Fredrick Nelio, come to me."

"Cyrus McErnest, come to me."

It came to no one's surprise that the two fighter craft ceased their regular patrol and approach the vessel they thought as insignificant prey. With unnatural consistency they positioned their craft directly over the ship's observation deck, taking care to match their inertia relative to the helpless ship. Rotational boosters flared up and stopped as a portion of the upper armor retracted, allowing the transparent canopies to face the deck below. Both pilots were in plain sight to the two people below.

"Fredrick Nelio, will you dance with death?"

...No.

Then you shall perish.

A thin green beam lanced out from the pair of humans on the deck of the civilian ship. The beam slipped through the viewport and the canopy as if it was just an innocent ray of light, except that it wasn't.

Fredrick Nelio passed without a scream.

Turning his attention to the other pilot, he asked, "Cyrus McErnest, will you dance with death?"

If.. I must.

Approval flowed from his form, chilling the opposite pilot even further. "Very well. As an instrument of slaughter, so I will forge you anew. Rise from your decadence and embrace your buried dedication. A life for life, a soul for a soul. Nomen Artensien."

The other piloted convulsed in his seat, but his fighter remained idle.

The pathways of power lingered, but eventually retracted. Something pushed against Claris' back, only this time trying to pull outwards instead of inwards. A spirit retracted from her mortal coils, leaving her empty and devoid of any strength. She almost collapsed.

"What.. was that?"

The strain was evidently hard for the wizard as well, since Harry was breathing harshly from the effort. His steely eyes gazed towards his Second, their very intensity burning Claris almost blind.

"A dance.. it was a dance, but not of the regular kind. That is all you need to know."

Straightening out, Harry looked down at the pool of blood, only to find it clotted dry and cracked. He expected that of course. The ritual had served its usefulness. Now, on to the Eviscerator.

"Tell me what you know about that mobile carrier you traipsed with under your former pirate captain."

"Yes Master."

The Eviscerator was a bloodthirsty vessel, but she didn't start that way at first. Like all combat purpose space ships, she started her operational life as a military asset. The Enforcer-class carrier was first drawn up at the dawn of the thirtieth century, and ran off the production line after a few minor technological upgrades only a decade after that. The carrier was designed and produced by Vindelyn Shipyards on Mars to meet the growing demand of fast, fuel-efficient and self-sufficient patrol ships that would be capable of patrolling the outlaw sectors of the solar system. As a ship class meant to square up against only a handful of slippery pirate corvettes, she would not last long against proper warships, but she was never meant to be used in this way the first place. Indeed, the Enforcer-class carriers quickly made a name for themselves amongst the pirate hunting circles for keeping up with all but the most nimble corvettes.

The particular specimen now known as the Eviscerator was just one of these quintessential patrol carriers. The Neptune 3rd Habitat Police Force used a few of these ships to pacify the Rings and ensure safe conduct for any mining expeditions. The Athenian Justice as it was known then was a solid performer, being perfectly maintained and crewed by a well-oiled machine under a not-too-incompetent captain.

It was a pity that the police captain was a little bit too sentimental. Faced with a choice between saving a container-load of hostages or

his command over his ship, he chose the container instead. The result that the dashing young pirate known as Hargrave got both the ship and a container full of dead corpses. Such a pity to leave the bodies behind.

The newly rechristened Eviscerator was quickly put to work on some more proactive missions. With her speed, her nimbleness and her robust military build, she could overpower pretty much every medium-sized trade ship. The slower, the juicier. Her single heavy turret and a maximum capacity of just four fighters in her cargo bay might not square up to much compared to full military vessels, but it was usually enough to pound away escorting freelancers from any attractive haul. Only rarely did Hargrave had to turn down his mark.

While the dependable Enforcer-class was slowly showing its age, constant little software updates and equipment rotation meant that the warhorse could take up the burden for a few decades more. Even as the current police forces moved on to the Liberena-class and Sawyer-class mobile carriers, decommissioned or damaged Enforcers always ended up in the hands of ambitious mercenaries who were familiar with the advantages this dependable class could bring.

In its sumptuous cargo bay, all was quiet. The few deck hands that the ship possessed were largely lounging about to pass the time. With only two fighters, both of them scheduled to be back in quite a few hours yet, there was only so many tasks they could finish before they were resorted to twiddling their thumbs. That suited these people fine.

So when a pair of humans suddenly appeared in their midst, no one was really alert enough to recognize the threat for what it was. Even the small popping sound went by as the deck hands were accustomed to all kinds of noises.

Twirling his Elder Wand, Harry rapidly took in his targets before lifting his wand towards the ceiling, shouting, "Multify!"

An umbrella of seven red bolts spat out from the tip, travelling upwards before bending back to travel forth in different directions. The slow projectiles easily closed the distance in the open hangar only to impact hard against the unaware vacuum-suited crewmen. Without any armor, wards or electrical shielding, the spell was able

to act with its full strength against the human bodies, knocking them all flat out.

Clariss let out a small sigh after confirming that they were still breathing. Not that both of them cared for the uncouth brutes, but it was hard to operate the Hangar if you didn't have anyone left who knew what to do. It was only their weak will and lack of preparation that allowed Harry to stun them all in one shot. Against determined fighters, he would need to use his more powerful arsenal. Quite aware that his shields and wards did not fare too well against any form of EMP, Harry was not eager to handicap himself when the time came to fight to kill.

"Guide me to the bridge."

"Yes, sir."

He followed his taller subordinate, briefly enjoying the view from behind before getting back to business. It wouldn't do to get caught off guard because he was imagining the shape of Clariss' ass cheeks. Merlin, he was more than a century old. Cradle robbing was something even he consciously avoided, even though they were both technically above legal age.

If such a thing as legal age even still exists in the far future.

The woman stopped in her tracks. Thinking there was some sort of threat up ahead, Harry readied his wand for a stunner but could sense no one in the cramped corridor. "What?"

"Before we arrive at the bridge.. can you use your magic to change the settings of my pistol?"

"Why? Do you need more power?"

She shook her head. "No, not that. Just back then, you shot off a red bolt that knocked people out. Can you do that for my gun as well? I would.. rather not kill most of those at the bridge. They are still my colleagues, and aren't the worst amongst the ship." When Harry stayed silent, she quickly added, "They won't pose a threat to you, I'll make sure of that. We still need the bridge operators to keep the ship from falling apart."

It wasn't a question of ability. Rather, the cost was significantly higher. He would have to retrieve some form of magical ingredient from one of his few shrunken trunks and embed the magical conductor within the pistol along with a few strands of his hair. In effect, he would be creating a pseudo wand, tied to his magical core, but significantly more inefficient and weaker in output. It would be a hatchet job, and until he could revise the theory in his own time and collect the proper ingredients, he couldn't do anything better. His forte was in combat magic and transfiguration, not in wandmaking or artificing.

Added to that, he would be granting his Second a power that he was not eager to extend. While he could see the utility of having a second pair of hands that could disable people, that power could potentially be turned against himself. Since the power came from his own core, he would receive a small warning should the sidearm be used against him, but without a shield already in effect he would be caught off-guard.

Still, he needed to make a decision. Should he share in his power and trust that his Second would use it in his own interests, or should he monopolize all magic for himself and leave his minions as harmless as possible?

'Damn, that sounds too much like old Voldemort, and look how far he got.'

With a silent nod, he held up his hand for the gun. Receiving it, he cast a small spell that disassembled the weapon back in its component parts. Individual pieces of metal, crystal and electronics hovered before him as he shifted his energies into incorporating another element in the ensemble.

The art of artificing worked by nuance and feeling, not with knowledge or exact science. It was not necessary to know the properties of the materials or the function of the individual components. Keeping in mind the end result and putting your magical will into the desire to realize that result would push the magic in finding the most optimal solution out of the available raw materials. Of course, not every wizard could follow these simple instructions and expect a brand new time turner in their hands. There were still tons of rules and theory that needed to be absorbed, and sadly for Harry, he was not able to gather many books about

this elusive subject to create the more advanced stuff that Flemel had invented.

In modern times the discipline had declined, both due to the reactionary mindset of the modern Wizarding World and due to the difficulty of incorporating modern electronics in magical devices. It seemed to him though that the electronics of this era were more compatible. Was it a change in principle? A difference in materials? Or a deliberate design meant to shield against EMP? Any of those reasons were possible, but he was not about to speculate endlessly while time was of the essence.

Opening one of his spare pockets, he retrieved one miniaturized trunk, enlarged it just enough to let his hands through, and quickly retrieved a particular ingredient that he had a feeling would fit with Claris' psychic imprint.

The blond lock of Veela hair intertwined itself along the lengthy metal barrel of the pistol along with a few black strands of his own. Pushing back his magical manifestations, Harry reassembled the pistol back into its original design. He handed the weapon back to his lieutenant, who looked suitably impressed at the entire process. She looked over the weapon, finding a new switch on the side of the frame that she could turn with her thumb.

"Is this..?" Receiving a nod from Harry, she thumbed the switch, and seemed almost shocked when the blue crystalline finishes alongside the surface morphed into red. "Amazing..."

"The crystals are magical absorbents, so I can't do anything about the color change. At least you'll know what you'll be shooting."

"This will be more than sufficient, Master."

"Just remember that I'm not some stupid magical dispenser machine. I'm granting you this toy because you need it. I won't do that for every little need."

"I am grateful."

With that, the duo crossed the remaining short distance to the bridge. The sturdy hatch was closed shut, but that did not phase the wizard

at all. With a carefully overcharged Alohamora he was able to wave away the locks aside. The hatch lifted up to reveal the bridge.

It was more cramped than he thought and totally unlike the spacious luxury suites that he faintly recalled from that muggle sci-fi show, Trekstar or something. Instead, the colors were matted in a dull shade of grey. Bridge stations were blocky and utilitarian like he would imagine it would be on a 21st century Royal Navy frigate, although with rounded corners. A large 180 degree viewscreen dominated the walls, showing not only the open space, but also outlines of asteroids and other nearby objects, with small script detailing insignificant data if anyone was interested.

Captain Hargrave himself was seated atop the only elevated position, the command chair. It was shaped like an eggshell cut diagonally in half, and allowed him to swivel in each direction. Two 2-dimensional viewscreens surrounded him on each side, portraying tactical information, while a larger 3-dimensional hologram showed a schematic of his own ship along with the readiness status of each component section.

Upon Harry and Claris' arrival, the Captain turned around surprised at the sudden intrusion. "Claris? How did you get here?" Noticing the extra companion, the pirate whipped out his own twin sidearms and aimed them straight at Harry. "And you, who are you!"

"I am Harry, and I have come to claim this fine little vessel as my own."

Hargrave's first instinct was to laugh at the absurdity of the young man's audacity. It was therefore a relief that his second instinct kicked in, the instinct that said that confident men were not necessarily stupid. This 'Harry' did not step inside the confines of his bridge unarmed unless he had some sort of ace in his hole. How Claris managed to appear on his ship without being transferred back by shuttle or capsule he didn't know, but the grizzled survivor didn't intend to solve that puzzle right now. Whoever this Harry was, he was obviously a threat to his command.

Therefore, he needed to die. "I'm sorry boy, but I can't let you do that."

And shot the boy with both his illegally modified firearms. The explosive rounds should make short work of this upstart.

The sheer scale of the explosion obscured his view of the destruction, which made him utterly unprepared when some impossible energy whip ripped along his hands, skinning and burning the tendons and forcing him to drop his babies.

The smoke swiftly ventilated away, revealing both the boy and his blasted lieutenant unharmed. "How? What kind of shit are you pulling me with?"

"Why, magic. Ever heard of it?"

"Stop fooling around! Magic doesn't exist!"

"Would you like to see otherwise?"

Not really waiting to find out, he instead rolled sideways and behind the cover of a duty station. He looked up at the terrified tactical officer and scowled. "What are you waiting for? Shoot them both!"

Those who had held their weapons ready opened fire on their targets. Claris jumped back beyond the entrance and used the bulkhead as cover as she fired from her pistol, spitting red electrical bolts at the bridge officers. The boy had not sought any cover, and instead conjured up something strange, making all the lasers and bullets stop in midair. Hargrave only took a few seconds to gape at the stupendous sight before retrieving a grenade from a cache he had buried underneath the console. Perhaps some EMP would disrupt whatever shielding apparatus the boy was carrying.

Drawing out the pin, Hargrave drew back his arm to let the ball-shaped projectile loose.

This time properly prepared for the threat of grenades, Harry waved his arm, summoning a wind that sent the ball right back at the face of the thrower.

"Oh shi—"

The EMP detonation marked the last person on the bridge to lose his consciousness.

As Harry casted bindings on every unconscious crew member, Claris approached his former captain's body and lifted up one of his hands. Eying the shimmering silver command ring with calculation, she wriggled it from Hargrave's fat finger and turned to the finishing Harry. On a whim, she decided to kneel down on both her knees and present the ring on both her palms while keeping her head firmly lowered.

It made for an elegantly subservient sight.

"Master Harry, may I present to you the Eviscerator's command ring. Please take it, lord."

The grown boy took the ring as casually as if he snatched a piece of candy. "What does it do?"

Suppressing the urge to palm her face, she explained the basics of its functions. It took a minute or two for the implications to set in. "Basically, it allows you to input commands to the ship that no one else can overrule. It is a symbol of your ownership and allows you to rewrite practically every program and every function that runs the ship. You'll need it to lock down the ship, for the other crewmen manning the turrets and engines will notice the captain's absence soon."

"Hmmm, all right." The boy assessed the powerful ring for a few more seconds, then handed it back to an astonished looking Claris. "You keep the ring. I don't know the first thing about how to lock down the ship."

"..Very well.. milord, if that is your wish."

Secretly Claris felt extremely elated. Not only was she in possession of one of the most coveted and prestigious item a spacer could wear (allowing her access to some services and privileges in port she would never have without the ring), she also was granted proof of the magician's trust. As long as she kept herself useful to the powerful young man, she would be able to benefit from the wake he would leave behind as he advanced to greater riches. Taking control of the ship by himself without earning a single scratch in return was the most obvious demonstration of his might.

As she looked back on the unconscious and bound body of her former captain, she could not help but nod her thanks to him. After all, if it wasn't for his decision to force Claris to join the boarding party, she would never have been in the position to grab this much power.

'Power and glory, all at my fingertips so long I stay by my master's side.'

With obvious pride, she approached the idle command chair and seated herself on the soft cushion. The AI routines automatically recognized the command ring beneath her gauntlets and reconfigured their control protocols to her command. With a few swift commands she put the ship in emergency mode, locking down most advanced functions from her fellow crewmates.

After throwing a few other essential safeguards, she left the chair and turned back to report to her bemused superior.

"My lord, we should secure the ship physically by stunning and binding all the other crew members on this ship. While they lack the authorization to lift the lockdown, they may still be able to physically sabotage the ship. We should take matters to prevent that as soon as possible."

The dark-haired boy nodded. "Sure. You stay here and keep an eye on things. I'll scour the entire ship and take care of the people. Do you have a map or something?"

Looking around, Claris saw an idle holopad and handed the device over to her Master. With a few wireless commands a small hologram of the ship projected up Harry's palm. The lifesigns of all the sixteen other conscious crewmen aboard the Eviscerator showed in green. Harry smirked and left the bridge without another word.

At the end of the standard day, the reawakened wizard had subdued the rest of the rowdy pirates. He was now in possession of a mobile carrier, two heavy interceptors and a crippled research vessel, along with some assorted personnel.

The bounties made up for perfect welcoming gifts for his return to the mortal plain. The boy-who-left had finally returned.

End Notes: I haven't received many reviews yet, which makes me slightly sad. On the other hand, there are millions of other tiny HP fics out there, so I'm not surprised that this fic is receiving little attention, especially when you take into account the whackball plot and multitude of OCs.

Subjugating the Masses

If there was anything that got him off, it was seeing a crowd of muggles cowering in fear before him. He collected every pirate crew member from the Eviscerator along with the survivors of the Helical Visage to the mobile carrier's spacious hangar bay. All that apparating had put his magical reserves dangerously close to exhaustion, but with his opponents subdued and incarcerated he didn't have to worry about any more combat. The only unaccounted person was the fighter pilot floating blissfully somewhere out in space a hundred kliks away, but the sod wouldn't wake up for a while yet.

No, this was his moment now. With his wand ready for anything and his three minions ready with their own artificed weapons, there was nothing the prisoners could do to overcome him now. They were only muggles, after all. He had taken discrete scans of everyone's cores and nothing seemed to suggest that any of them had an ounce of magical talent.

That didn't mean that wizards were extinct. Harry wasn't quite sure if his ploy to destroy the Wizarding World had succeeded. There could still be some wizards and witches out there in the universe, hiding behind their Statute of Secrecy like the cowardly rabbits that they are. Until he could be certain there were no other magic users, he would have to take care in hiding the extent of his powers.

That still left these people. A mix of pirate crewmen and a gaggle of interns and , amongst them an enthusiastic professor who had more than an unhealthy interest in his magic. There was no fear in that one, only anger and excitement. His mindset was completely unlike his terrified colleagues.

Harry smirked and clapped his hands, drawing all attention to himself. "May I have your attention please."

"Now, as you have surely heard, I am Harry, your new master, boss, captain, or whatever you wish to call me. In the end, your lives as you know it are over. All of you will henceforth serve at my whim. If I say jump, you ask how high. If I zip out my pants, you ask mouth or pussy. Realize that I have the power of life and death over you, and if you refuse me in any request, I can make your life very uncomfortable for you. Have I made myself clear?"

Naturally, a few people didn't agree with that statement, and thrashed vigorously against their bonds. The only male minion Harry had converted so far went down the line and hit the shoulder butt of his rifle against the bodies of the most hyperactive ones, subduing them into silence.

"Well then, I understand that you might feel a little bit hesitant in giving up all your freedom to serve me unconditionally. Let me demonstrate how carefully you should make your choice."

With a flick of his wand he levitated one particular prisoner from his place amongst the crowd. The others quickly recognized the stout figure as Captain Hargrave, the former pirate owner of the mobile carrier and the one who ordered the attack on the research vessel. The man hid plenty of fears within its mind, but his trained instincts and vast experience made him look outwardly angered. The man tried to spit obscenities at the wizard, but the rope between his lips prevented that. Good.

Cutting the spell, Harry let the heavy man drop painfully against the deck. The man tried to squirm away, but the boy approached and let his boot land on the man's chest, keeping him in place.

"The man you know as Captain Hargrave lies before me in total defeat. He fell easily despite his experience and penchant for violence. By rite of combat, that makes all that is his my possession."

Turning his contemptuous green eyes towards the ship captain, he spoke softly, but still loud enough for the rest to hear.

"Will you submit to me, Captain Hargrave, as three of your subordinates have done?"

The defiant man shook his head vigorously. Harry admired his courage. Even if Hargrave caved in to surrender to him, it matter none as Harry had no intention of keeping such an authoritative figure alive. No one must be left alive who was strong enough to challenge his rule.

"Very well, you made your choice. Now you will have to die by it."

His boot lifted from the prone body. Taking a few steps back, Harry began the incantations of one of his nastier curses. "Taio Tau Tavar."

Nothing happened for the first few seconds, but that was an illusion. Slowly, but surely, the throated cries of Hargrave grew more frantic and pitched. His vagabond outfit began to shake, showing a portend of what was to come.

Ghosts began to appear, as if they had been there the whole time. The Dementor-like shades hovered about the helpless human, as if appraising their latest prey. The captain broke completely at that moment, and begged Harry with his eyes to spare him from this onslaught.

Fat chance.

The ghosts then travelled through the former pirate with their insubstantial bodies. Their trail did not leave the mortal shell undisturbed. Flesh began to boil and melt. Bones began to heat up and catch fire. Organs solidified into stone and clothes began to disintegrate into some type of mucous liquid. Before their very eyes, Harry, his minions, and his prisoners were witness to the macabre festival that unfolded right before their eyes.

All that was left in the end was a pool of ash and something that looked like snot. The very stench of the organic waste permeated deeply within the entire hangar, leaving everyone unable to deny the truth that was blatantly mocking their very conception of reality.

Magic was real, and it could kill.

After he judged that everyone was settled into the idea that he had no compulsion to spare their lives, he set in to induct them in his service. He approached the closest line of kneeling pirates and held up the tip of his wand against the exposed skull of the first in line.

"What is your name, and what is it you do?"

"Ehm eh it's Gerry, Gerry Bluewater. I'm ah, an environmental tech sir, a scrubber, erh you know, filtration and recycling of air and all that stuff."

"Well then Gerry, will you submit to me?"

"Yes sir, gladly sir, whatever you want sir sorcerer, I've always wanted to work for a cool magic thrower like you sir, and—"

The wandtip pressed harsher against Gerry's skull. Harry scowled at him. "Don't lie to me. I don't appreciate deception."

"Well ah.. I'm sorry sir, very sorry! I'm afraid, okay, I'm scared! I don't wanna die like the captain over there so please let me live!"

"Good." Harry turned back to the others and stated, "Let this be a warning to you all. Don't try to lie to me or hold back any truths you think I need to hear. Believe it when I say that you have a better chance of staying alive if you spill all your guts instead of trying to hide them from my presence."

The wizard lord then focused back on his current charge and cast his Mark upon Gerry's arm. The man screamed in pain.

"This will be my Mark, branding you as my vassal, slave and possession. Dedicate your life to my will, and I will reward you with wealth and power. Fail in my expectations or betray my trust, and I will cut the strings that bind your life in this world."

The rest of the former pirate crew didn't present any further problems. Begrudging though they may be at this new treatment, they were hardly the top dogs in the pirating trade. Criminals who had dedicated themselves to the highly dangerous trade known as piracy were pretty desperate people to begin with. Naturally resentful towards any law and authority, they were nonetheless willing to obey so long as they knew who was in charge. With the poignant example of Hargrave's corpse, they were even willing to accept Harry's magic at face value.

Now done with recruiting his new crew, Harry released the ropes that held the pirate crew in place and motioned for Claris. The woman, holding her pistol ready in case someone tried something stupid, approached her master. Clearly aware of the eyes tracking her motion, she arrived before her master and knelt to her knees, bowing forward until her lips caressed the toe of his boot.

"What is your will, my lord?"

Harry smiled in amusement at the excessive display of submission. The theatrics were a bit too Voldermort-ish, but at least it served as a visible example to the others of his authority. "Please order the crew back to work and put this ship back into shape. I want you to retrieve both of her fighters and prepare whatever you have to do to secure the research vessel. Is it still capable of flight?"

"No master, it is not. Her engines are too damaged to repair outside of a dry dock. Captain Hargrave actually planned to tow the crippled ship towards a nearby pirate base."

Shrugging, Harry waved away the problem. "Do whatever you think is necessary to retrieve that ship. Now, please dismiss your crew and leave this deck. I wish to be alone with our other 'guests'."

As Claris and the other pirates trooped out, Harry turned to face the handful of civilian survivors of the assaulted research vessel. They were dirty, injured but they were still alive. That meant that they could still be useful.

"Now I'm left with you bunch. What to do with you all?" He waved away the gags that muffled their mouths, allowing them to speak. "Well?"

A young scientist spoke first. "Mr. Wizard, please, you don't need to do all this. We're no threat. Can't you just let us go? We swear we won't say a word about you. Wipe our memories or cut out our tongues if you have to, but I'm not cut out for all this death and violence!"

"Harry, if I may call you that, please reconsider your current course of actions." Dr. Selner pressed. "You are powerful, no one disputes that. There is no need to show the world how ruthless you are. If you would just let us get a word out to the Exploration Society, then I'm sure they will be glad to shelter you and reintegrate you back into our society. There is nothing to be afraid of us. By our very mission we uphold the highest standards. I will personally insure that you will not be put in a cage to live out the rest of your life like that."

"Bullshit." Professor Zhang interjected, pressing his whole body forward to glare at his fellow academic. "Our mission was supposed to be secret and untraceable. No one at the ES headquarters were

supposed to gain access to any details of our route in the Jupiter Outback. And guess what? A pirate ship miraculously ambushed us in the middle of nowhere! Do you think that is a coincidence?"

"You know very well that that is baseless speculation!"

The two bickered back and forth. The senior of the two kept maintaining that there was some sort of conspiracy afoot to eliminate them all, while the woman kept insisting that Harry should cease his lawless attitude and turn a leaf towards a new life.

When the two started trading forth complicated ethical theories, Harry decided to put a stop to it by unleashing a firecracker from his wand.

"Okay kids, I think we're getting nowhere with this discussion. What matters is that I need more people to crew this ship and do whatever other task that I find useful. Unfortunately, you're not exactly the sailor type like the pirates I took in. Unless you can think of something to make yourself useful, I will decide it for you."

The academics looked at each other, trying to read each others' cues on how to proceed. Selner spoke up first, with noticeable hesitation. "If we refuse to.. join your service, will we end like that pirate captain over there?"

Everyone couldn't help but take a glance at the decomposed pile of organic matter.

The boy-who-left smirked and leered at the doctor. "Well, someone as lovely as you can always find a place at the foot of my bed. I always wanted to shag a MILF with a doctoral." Letting his eyes wander to the remaining females, he added, "That goes for the rest of you snatches. Maybe I'll even share you with the rest of the crew."

His last word elicited a shudder that turned Harry on. Still, now was not the time to indulge himself.

"What about us?" A male doctor asked. He did not look too handsome, so he had a more than casual interest in the answer. Harry jerked his head back to the pile of Hargrave's remains and the rest quickly caught on. No one wanted to die like that.

"I don't have all day, mates. Start volunteering yourself. Anything that isn't totally irrelevant to my benefit is worth having around."

The first offer didn't take long. "I've got an accounting degree. I can keep records and manage your goods and funds. And your taxes, if there is any you'd like to pay."

"Sounds good enough for me." Harry approached the young man and inducted him into his service. After the short ritual, he unbound the man's ties. "Anyone else?"

"I can do weapons maintenance and development!" A perky blond revealed. "I'll be really useful to you, I swear it to you, boss! I worked on the Solardyne Suppression System for a few years so I know like, a lot about laser turrets!"

"Felicity!" Selner snapped, looking horrified at her pupil. "How could you? The man's a brute. He'll be the death of you, if not your conscience."

The girl was indignant. "I don't care. I just want to live."

One by one, the scientists relented to their desire to survive and came up with some sort of function that would make them useful in Harry's employ. As a specialist in extractable material science, Zhang was not terribly useful in any obvious function, but he could help with purchasing refits and maintaining the integrity of the hull. Since he was the most level-headed and practical of the lot, Harry designated him as the civilian leader of his crew.

So after half an hour of tortuous patience, he got himself a spare pilot, a few environmental aides, a senior engineer, a pair of turret operators, a junior missile operator and a few sensor techs. He even got a stock broker, although he assigned the kid to environmentals. As he heard, there were never too much people to maintain the biopods or clean up after the ever-accumulating sludge.

Only two remained silent in the end. That the strongly principled Dr. Selner refused to budge was no surprise. The other grey-haired man was an unknown. Harry approached him first. "Who the bollocks are you?"

The man stared fearlessly back at the powerful wizard. His entire posture radiated calm and peace. "Dr. Arnaud Rodriguez, exogeologist."

"Okay exowhatever, would you rather die than work in my service?"

"I believe that aiding evil in any conscious capacity would deny me entrance in the life beyond this life. It is impermissible to beg for my own life only to continue to allow you to take others. I do not fear your demonic sorcery, nor your infantile threats. I have made my peace with this plane of existence and am ready to ascend."

"Hm, so we have a comedian in our midst." The boy wizard grinned viciously at the unperturbed man, retrieving his ritual dagger from the folds of his robe. "If you're that sure about your beliefs, why don't we test them?"

Stabbing the curved blade through the man's neck, Harry let Arnaud choke to death as he prepared his wand to cast a complex spell. With dozens of precise movements later, he called out, "Luminaris Immortalis Palmaga."

A powerful spray of light shot out from his wand, the strands gripping against the scientist's fading body. As soon as the strands of light had finished wrapping around the body, Harry pulled back his wand, dragging the net with him and drawing out Arnaud's entire ghostly consciousness with him.

The newly birthed shade looked at his own insubstantial shell in acute horror. Looking back, he was met by his own visage, now stuck in eternal agony. "How.. this cannot be the afterlife? What is done to me! You, wizard, tell me now!"

The ghost tried to strangle Harry, but the boy looked unconcerned as the grayish hands passed through his flesh. The ghost tried to attempt several more methods of harming the tormentor, only to come up short. Eventually the man sank in on himself, defeated and lifeless.

Harry pounded this demonstration in the scientists' heads. "Let this be a lesson to you all. You've all studied a lot, so one more piece of knowledge won't hurt. Know that I have a thousand different ways to kill you, and ten times more to torture you. Whatever you think you

can gain by denying me what I want, it won't work. This man thought he could cheat me and escape to the next life. Well, I pulled his very spirit from his flesh and cursed his existence to haunt this ship until I release his bonds. Even in death you cannot escape."

Leaving the ghost to wallow in his failed gamble, Harry turned to the final holdout. Dr. Selner looked up at the monstrous boy with reinvigorated dread. Her frightened and tearful eyes actually managed to turn him on even further. The sight of a crying and helpless woman really strained at his repressed desire. He almost couldn't restrain himself from ripping apart her clothes and shag her right on the deck.

Perhaps he could kill two birds with one stone.

So with an eerily perverted glint, Harry released his belt, unzipped his battle trousers and dropped his boxers to his knees. With his hardening manhood in full sight of the entire civilian crowd, Harry jerked his exposed jolly at the terrified and disgusted woman and waited expectantly.

Dr. Selner took one good look at Hargrave's corpse, then at Arnaud's intangible despairing form.

Her velvet lips finally parted. "Mouth.. or pussy?"

One sensational blowjob later, Harry sat on the observation chair at the bridge. The satisfied, shit-eating grin on his face was missed by no one, the crew having heard the incident through the grapevine before his arrival. The normally prideful Selner was reduced to a humiliated and sobbing wreck by the time she was forced to swallow. He had given her a reprieve afterwards by assigning her to quarters accompanied by a handful of helpers and dismissed the rest to their new bunks.

It was not as if he was a complete horndog. This was all a charade, a power game where he had to prove he was the top dog on this vessel. Still, his first orgasm after a millennia of fitful sleep was refreshing. He was sure to sample Dr. Selner's services plenty of times.

In the meanwhile, he had to get the Eviscerator going. There was nothing more to be gained by floating around in this asteroid field like a bunch of idiots.

Absently tapping his wand against the armrest, he turned to his Second. "When can we depart from this place?"

Clariss, sitting atop the command chair, wielded her command ring like a natural, bringing up several pieces of information before replying, "It will take two more hours to retrieve both interceptors in our hold and four hours to attach the towing cables to the Helical Visage. After that, we are ready to make our way to Vlessing Base a few light-minutes away."

"How long will the trip take?"

"Well, with the Visage dragging us down, it will take twice as long to accelerate, so I would estimate about four weeks."

"Four weeks! That long just to get to the edge of the belt?"

The lieutenant grimaced a little. "You have to understand, master, that we haven't invented every wonder people in your day imagined the future to possess. There is no way for us to even approach the speed of light with our ion engines. The best we can practically hope for is ten percent, but even that is relegated to the most specialized drag racers."

'Darnit, four damn weeks is a bloody long time to be twiddling my thumbs. I have stuff to do, things to check, spells to cast.'

"Alright. What would it take to travel back to Earth."

"To Earth, sir?"

Why did Clariss look so astonished? "Yeah, the big blue planet where humans first settled, y'know?"

"Erm.. you might not be aware of this, but Earth's orbit is closed."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Space travel is restricted by the United Terran Hegemony. They have tons of cruisers and battleships patrolling the orbits around the Earth and the Moon. Nothing can get through them without permission. Anything else is blown out of the sky."

"And I take it we can't just ask this Hegemony to give us permission to land on Earth?"

"No sir. They don't let anyone in, not even those without a criminal record."

"Damn."

That threw a wrench in Harry's plans. He needed to go back to Earth and recover any magical caches he had left behind. With only a few shrunken trunks in his possession, he had little in the way of resources. Most of his books were tucked somewhere high up in some cave on Mt. Everest, and without them he could not gain the specialized spells he needed to adapt to this new era.

"Suppose I have some spell to make my ship invisible to their sensors. How long would it take to travel to Earth from here?"

His subordinate didn't look very confident. "The Eviscerator is not designed as a long-distance cruiser. It would take at least two years of constant burn by my estimation if we were to travel there unaided."

"Unaided?"

"Well..." Claris looked back at her console and changed the hologram to a schematic of some sort of.. floating cannon. "The only way we have to travel even close to the speed of light, even if only temporary, is to make use of the Gravitic Catapult."

"What does it do?"

"The science types would be able to explain it better." The woman shrugged before continuing, "Basically, it creates some sort of distortion field that lowers the mass of any ship inside. It then uses an ionic burst and electric coils to propel the ship out the barrel at very high acceleration. Due to the non-existent gravity the ship will reach a very high velocity, up to thirty-five percent the speed of light

for the most optimized designs, but as the mass grows back to its original value the vessel will constantly slow down until it falls back into cruising speed at its destination. Using such a catapult could bring us to Earth within a week."

In a nutshell, it worked just like the catapult Dudley once put together to bombard Harry with rocks. "That sounds impressive, but there's a catch, isn't it?"

"There aren't too many catapults in operation since it's very expensive and time-consuming to build. Most of them are owned by planetary or powerful lunar governments and will not allow any outlaws like us through. Since the energy and resources required to activate the catapults is substantial, it is beyond our means to pay for the passage, especially when there is only one catapult in the hands of outlaws here in the Jupiter sector."

"Give me a figure."

"Three hundred million credits."

That didn't really tell Harry anything. Claris sensed her master's incomprehension and added, "The Helical Visage is worth barely a million as scrap, and the Eviscerator is only worth forty million at most on the black market."

"Merlin. So we have only forty-one million in assets."

While there might be some spell that allowed him to magical accelerate an entire multi-ton ship, he sure didn't know one himself. Apparating his ship was not a viable option either; just the distance and mass alone was impossibly daunting.

That meant that Harry had to work a few jobs to get the required price to pay for the overpriced passage through the catapult. Or he could spend two whole years wasting away in utter boredom while his ship trudged at a snail's pace back to the third planet of the sun. Then when he finally reached his goddamned home planet, he would have to evade tons of scary warships and smuggle himself back to the planet to retrieve his magical treasures.

Maybe trying to return to Earth immediately wasn't such a good idea yet. He knew nothing of current technology and society.

"Tell me more about this United Terran Hegemony that keeps such a tight lid on my ol' home planet."

With her fighters back in her hold and the wreck of the science ship secured with her towing cables, the Eviscerator trudged back out into open space. The trip to the pirate outpost took several weeks of boring moments, giving ample opportunity for the new crews to settle in and adjust. During this time, Harry closeted himself in the captain's quarters and didn't show much of himself, presumably because he was involved in many complicated magical rituals. Surprisingly, he didn't even summon Selner or any other woman to his quarters to 'comfort' him. It was both a relief and a worry. Perhaps there was something worse in store for the women?

In the absence of Harry's terrifying presence, Lieutenant Claris reinforced her grip as the magician's second in command. She disciplined the crew, reassigned postings, integrated the civilian scientists with the existing crew, and rewrote Captain Hargrave's security protocols and other customizations. A good pirate captain never left his ship defenseless in his absence, and it was certainly the case for the Eviscerator.

Already several crew members had been rendered injured by an overheated power line. Luckily Dr. Selner was a fully accredited medical doctor, and when pushed out of her depression, was convinced to use the medical facilities of the warship to its full potential, a first in twenty years. Claris wondered if Harry deliberately worked to convince Selner to stay alive and serve in this capacity, knowing her skills would come in high demand. Doctors who were good enough to serve in a medical unit usually had no reason to serve on an outlaw ship. There were simply too many postings on too many space stations or colonies where they were sorely needed and didn't mind waving away a criminal record or two.

Besides that little gift of good fortune, the rest wasn't going so well. Hargrave's hacks were deeply dug into the ship's AI routines. It would be impossible to detect them all until the ship is completely docked at the base. Added to that was the fact that the scientists weren't able to get along with the existing pirate crew. The two groups held completely different beliefs and behaved in practically the opposite way. Just because the eggheads were roped into joining a pirate crew didn't mean they completely gave up on their

soft, pacifist tendencies. Claris had to appoint her new Chief of Security, Cleveland, into coming up with a few measures that would not result in the simmering tensions boiling to a ship-wide brawl.

Still, the power she wielded was immense. Being Hargrave's second meant being on the background, working out all the boring stuff and letting the captain steal the spotlight. The former pirate captain also depended on all his section chiefs, leaving Claris with little opportunity to ingratiate herself with her boss.

With Harry, the balance of relations shifted. His complete lack of interest in the nuts and bolts of running a space ship had left her as the sole channel between Harry and the rest of the crew. In essence, that made her Harry's surrogate in all matters technical, and gave her a wide swath of authority that she eagerly exploited. She was the one who wore the command ring. She was the one who gave out everyone's orders. She was the one who everyone had to approach for further requests. With her de-facto decision making powers, she was the queen of the ship. Of course, Claris would never act against Harry's interests, but who said that her own wishes clashed against Harry's? Life was good.

After a tense few weeks of navigating the asteroid field, they eventually reached the perimeter of Vlessing Base, one of the few independent pirate outposts along the lawless Jupiter belt.

Pilot Nicholas relayed the last few details requested by Vlessing Flight Control. "And that's all we need for oxygen and fuel."

"Confirm receipt. Good luck on your approach, Eviscerator. VFC out."

Terry, the civilian intern who volunteered to be the quartermaster's mate, began to initiate a connection with the station's market interface. They had plenty of high-grade scientific equipment to sell from their bounty. The old Helical Visage herself was being towed away to a scrapyard by one of the station's tug, leaving the mobile carrier to approach a docking beam unencumbered.

Lieutenant Claris nodded at the smooth proceedings and began to shutdown all her interfaces. Rising from her seat, she announced, "Inform me when we have five minutes until we dock. I'll be heading to the Captain's Quarters to inform our master of our arrival."

Only thirty seconds passed before someone began to comment, "That ass tease doesn't know when to stop. Sheesh, she's all 'yes master yes milord' over Captain Kid. Next thing we know she'll be calling him 'your highness' or 'your majesty'."

"Well," Nicolas retorted, "For someone who can make your very skin boil you alive, I don't care how much I have to kiss Captain Kid's arse to keep my body the way it is right now."

"Not that he'd want you to. He's got that hot medical doctor and Miss Queen to baby his backside. Maybe you can clean his toilet instead. Who knows, maybe waving around his shit will give you magic powers."

The whole bridge crew erupted into chuckles, with the exception of Terry who was seemingly hard at work comparing prices.

Jennings, the middle-aged navigator, looked up from his empty console and said, "Hey guys, maybe it's not a bad thing kiddo got rid of old Hargrave. Don't get me wrong, Hargrave was a solid captain, but lately he was just..."

"We were raking in less credits each job." Stacy, the weapon's officer supplied. "Heck, this last job was practically a cakewalk if it wasn't for Captain Kid."

"Exactly. We all knew Hargrave was on the more prudent side and we all chose to serve under him because of that, but the jobs were starting to get ridiculously easy. If our bounties kept shrinking in this pattern, I wouldn't be able to afford the mansion that I dreamed for up in Pluto."

While Nicolas understood the sentiment, he wasn't one to agree completely. "Trouble is stirring up everywhere with the Martians making threatening noises. Everyone's up in their toes, so our old captain just thought he'd lay low by taking more unimportant jobs for a while. Captain Kid obviously knows squat about actually captaining a ship, let alone being a pirate. Who knows what kind of insane jobs he'll take us to? You can't deny that Hargrave kept us safe."

Someone snorted. "If I'd wanted to be safe I'd go back to kindergarten."

"Don't forget to take Captain Kid with you. He'd fit right in!"

Another round of laughter echoed in the bridge. Even Terry couldn't restrain his humor.

End Notes: You can still get out while you can.

The Most Gracious

A millennia was a long time. Ten centuries. A hundred decades. A thousand years. Would it not be any surprise that something so old would start to fall apart? Nothing is permanent. Great structures rot and fall into unrecognizable ruins. Corpses decompose into bones, which would further break down into nothingness. Only through some extraordinary preservation can some measure of agelessness set in. Apparently, in this age, wine originating back in his own time can trade hands for billions of credits. Oh, he loved a good mug of firewhiskey now and then, but anything strong would do. The pair of Old Neptunian 2911's Captain Hargrave had stashed behind his closet was a very good thirst quencher.

But Harry didn't care about vintage wine. He was more concerned about the state of his equipment, and in particular the contents of his trunk.

Magical trunks were never meant to last indefinitely. Sure, the artisans did take into account that they might be used a little longer than what an average muggle would use, but even the most stodgiest purebloods didn't think trunks were worth keeping out of tradition.

They were never meant to store perishable goods for that long of a period. Since the boy wasn't that much of a Potions Master (courtesy of a greasy-haired bastard), he never really paid attention to how carefully he stored his magical ingredients. In the end, when he checked all his trunks, he was kind of disappointed. Most of the dry stuff survived, but a lot of the liquids such as the oh-so-valuable Dragon's Blood had decayed into useless puss.

The lack of much of his reagents limited his options. Most of the more permanent magical effects needed an anchor in the material world in the form of a conductor. With almost no means to replenish magical ingredients, he would eventually run out of those options.

After inventorying all his stores, he set his sights to within himself. All the years in stasis would have definitely deteriorate his strength. The question was what had been affected, and in what proportion.

This required critical self-reflection to a degree that made it essential that he would not be disturbed.

The journey proved insightful in several disturbing ways.

The ravages of time did not leave his body unmolested. The stasis he was put in was actually not a true retardation of time. The wizards who designed his prison was not concerned about his well-being. They secretly hoped whatever would sustain his life would eventually fail through inactivity, letting him decay in his unbreakable prison. And when that time would come, the real trap would be spun.

It was pretty smart actually. Whoever added the array of wards did not forget to add some debilitating curses deep underneath. It was damn sneaky, and so low-powered that even Harry's constant deep incursions didn't detect them. Some of the curses still lingered onto his body in fact, having hundreds of years to lodge themselves in his very magical identity that it was practically impossible to separate the two.

In the end, the drain on his magical energies would continue, siphoning his strength to power his own shackles. The more he would use his magic, the more he would feed the curses that would weaken his strength. This in turn enhanced the energy siphon, leading to an ever-growing cycle of drain and pain.

The news, when it revealed its full extent, smacked Harry right across the face. It effectively neutered his high-powered options, and put a limit on even his low level enchantments. Every expenditure of magic, no matter how small or insignificant, accumulated ever larger towards his own squibification and eventual annihilation even.

This made the need to access his books and magical ingredients back on Earth much more urgent. He could not afford to throw battle spells left and right to be able to successfully raid a high-value target. But without taking those risks, he would never get enough credits fast enough to pay for the passage through the Gravitic Catapult.

Either he needed to earn the money the old fashioned way, or waste two whole years on an unenhanced burn towards Earth. And that was not even going in on the trouble he would receive with the United Terran Hegemony. They were a thorough bunch and impossible to negotiate with. Passing through their immense blockade and legendary orbital defense required great magics to

cloak the ship – something that might turn Harry in a vegetable by the time his ship descended onto the surface.

A chime sounded from his door. The embedded speakers in the room began to active. "Master Harry? Can I come in?"

The wizard sighed. He had ordered his command not to be disturbed unless something important happened. Hopefully his Second had not approached him for some trivial reason.

"Come in, Second."

The door slid open, revealing Claris in a tight-fitting ensemble with archaic runes running electronically over her fabric. The look she was going for was not quite like a military uniform, but close enough. Pirates were never really keen on trying to pretend they were disciplined soldiers, and neither was Harry. The pre-programmed runes were probably something of a personal touch, a dedication to his magic. Cute, but he could care less.

As soon as the woman stepped inside, she seemed paralyzed. It was not hard to guess why.

Every wall and every surface of his quarters were painted or carved with ritual circles and runes. Mayan, Egyptian, Scandinavian, there were designs from every major civilization up to the twenty-first century. He had used a couple of them in his recent preparations, but most of them were added there 'just in case.' It didn't hurt to be prepared, especially when he wanted to do something drastic like healing himself but didn't want to use his wand magic.

If there was one advantage to using such elaborate devices, it was that they drew power from other channels instead of a person's personal magical core. A wizard or witch's own magic served as a catalyst or bridge, facilitating a 'natural' magical reaction from a particular vessel and insure it wouldn't fizzle out prematurely. It was the poor squib's way to perform effective magic and largely impractical most of the time. Waving a wand was easier, and with a magical core within your body that was difficult to exhaust, nobody ever thought that diagrams and runes would have any practical use in the field.

That is until now.

Nodding to his subordinate, he motioned her to continue. The woman stepped in his darkened room with visible caution, taking care to step her heels off any markings he had carved into the floor.

"Master, I wish to inform you that we are on approach to Vlessing Base."

"Ah. Anything else?"

"Well.. the governor of the station wishes to meet with you in person at his office on your earliest convenience." That usually meant as soon as the ship was docked, even Harry knew that. "He was an acquaintance of former Captain Hargrave and expressed some interest in the new owner of the Eviscerator. It is not wise to refuse the governor, my lord."

'Hmph, even scumbag pirates still engage in the niceties of politics. Some things never change.'

"Very well. I suppose I can make a courtesy call. Do you know what to expect from this meeting?"

Claris thought carefully for a moment. It could be any reason, really. "The governor will likely invite you to an extended meal and ask you to relate the tale of your successful capture of the Eviscerator. No doubt he wishes to know how you have managed to avoid a mutiny of the ship's current crew."

That might be hard to explain to someone who Harry didn't want to reveal the full extent of his powers. Another weakness was that he was hardly successful in connecting with influential figures. Heck, he couldn't even make any friend anywhere up high in the Ministry of Magic in his entire terrestrial lifetime.

"I expect you to accompany to this meeting, Claris, so make sure you delegate instructions to my crew before we leave. I don't plan to stay idle here. We need to make more money quick."

"For the Catapult fee?"

"Amongst others, but that is the most critical yes."

She almost didn't speak up her next few words. "Vlessing Base has fewer connections in the underground information circle. There are rarely any rich targets of opportunity near this sector in space. If you want to earn money faster, then we'd have more luck at Rindebal Station that's situated closer along the main space lanes."

"Rindebal.. where have I heard that before.."

"It's the same station that owns and operates the Gravitic Catapult."

"Oh. So I guess that's the place to be, then? I guess we can find some sidejob here that allows us to collect our payment in Rindebal. Would that be hard to find here?"

"It may take some time, master."

"Then give it some priority to whoever you set the task with." Harry turned from the entrance and went back to his desk to study one of the few ritual grimoires he had carried in his trunks. "You're dismissed."

Bowing slowly, Claris stepped back from the lip of the entrance. "I will return in an hour to escort you to the governor's compound. Please prepare your clothes appropriately. Will you be going out with a more conventional suit?"

The Second was met with a single wave of his hand, indicating his lack of interest. She pressed the door to close and double stepped to her own personal quarters.

She had only one hour to put on a suitable dress and have the makeup bot work on her face and hair. Her master hadn't even looked at her during the entire boring trip to Vlessing. On one part she was relieved she wouldn't be forced to do something humiliating like perform a blowjob in public. On the other hand that overripened snatch called Selner might use her own charms to gain some sort of influence on the boy. That must never be allowed to happen. After years of drudgery, Claris was finally in a position of great power. She would do anything to keep it, even if it meant stirring up a violent murderer's fantasies.

It was time to remind the powerful wizard that she was a woman.

Lilliane Selner wanted to die. She really wanted to end her miserable life. The only problem was she wasn't sure she would manage to escape Harry's seemingly omnipotent powers. Even now his brand on her arm continued to mock her former independence. Every time she thought of a way to reveal Harry to the rest of the solar system, her brand would light up and her own veins would burn in excruciating pain. The harder she resisted, the more her body would suffer. It was as if all her rebellious thoughts would feed the spell that shackled her will. Try as she might, she could not overcome her threshold of pain and act in any detrimental fashion towards her slavemaster.

She was completely, utterly, his.

"You need to get over it, Lily." Professor Zhang told her for the umpteenth time as he tinkered with his holopad. "Move on. Accept your fate. Make a new life out of yourself."

The chief medical officer of the Eviscerator glared pitilessly at her superior. "That wasn't you having that monster's – thing! – in your mouth, stabbing in your throat, blocking your airpipe, slapping your cheeks, poking your eyes and god knows what else! I've been defiled! Defiled by a juvenile twenty year old who is so drunk with power that he's not mature enough to wield responsibly." Dropping her face in her palms, she added dejectedly, "I'm married. I have a husband. There is no way I can ever come back to James now and face him as his wife."

The stares were the worst. Ever since her public humiliation, every male looked at her in a different light. They respected her still – but lusted more blatantly after her body, as if she suddenly wouldn't mind all the stares. It was as if the single event had broken some sort of barrier that kept her former colleagues civil. What was worse was that the real pirates went a step further and demanded that she 'service' them as she had served the captain. Only through the Chief of Security's foresight were these ruffians apprehended and thrown in the brig for some cooling. Evidently, the second in command, that overzealous siren named Claris, had ordered that the new civilians were off-limits. They were now crew who would be expected to work with them, not slaves to be toyed and used.

Frankly, Dr. Selner preferred to be a slave. At least there wasn't any need for this charade to continue. Though she had sworn the

venerable doctor's oath, she would rather slit her own wrists than help rapists and killers recover from their wounds. She was sure the pirate boarders she helped patched up with the ship's facilities were the same ones who had killed all of the crew aboard the Helical Visage. Practically everyone on this ship besides her fellow scientists had blood on their hands.

"I hate this new life." The bitter woman murmured, brushing back her auburn red hair from her resentful eyes. "It goes against everything I stand for, for what the medical profession stands for."

The Asian had heard it all before. The woman needed to go beyond her traumatic experience.

"Aren't you the least interested in Harry himself? Think of the insights we can gain from our proximity to him and his magic. If we can unlock his secrets, we can give the gift of these powers to all of mankind. We have the potential here to usher in a new era for all of mankind!"

The woman glared back at the professor with her flaming green eyes. "Even in this morally bankrupt hellhole, all you continue to obsess about is your academic career."

Unabashed, Zhang acknowledged the accusation in full. "We all have to make some things out of our lives. When there are a hundred billion human in the solar system, it's hard to make your life have meaning. Look, I thought I could pursue this goal by joining the Jupiter Outback expeditions. Clearly I was wrong with the way my rotten rivals at the Exploration Society have betrayed us to these pirates. It was only through an unlikely destiny that we have ended up at the observer seats of one of the most unique and remarkable human being this age has known."

"Don't you call that abomination a human being. He is anything but like us. We don't even know he even came from Earth. How do you know he isn't some sort of extraterrestrial shape-shifter that has copied our forms when we studied him in that blue crystal?"

"We don't. Just because he exhibits one abnormality from baseline humans doesn't make him an alien." Zhang responded calmly, though the cloud in his eyes signaled that he was still mulling the

idea. "Still, though I do not blame you for it, you are letting your emotions get too much in the way of rational thought."

Selner grabbed the scruff of Zhang's coat and shoved him back from the desk he was leaning on. "There is nothing rational about this nightmare! We're stuck in this awful hell and all you can think about is your next scientific discovery!"

"Calm down, Lily! Okay, I'm sorry, Lily, I take it all back."

Before the female doctor could give the man some choice words, a soft alarm sounded in the entire medical bay.

"What is that?" Zhang asked.

The doctor didn't deign to respond and turned her back on the professor. She pressed some buttons on her console, retrieving several pieces of information.

Eventually, she slumped, all her anger forgotten. Her body shook and tears began to fall on her lap.

"What's wrong, Lily?" Concerned, Zhang came closer, but was careful not to touch the sensitive woman. "Has Harry.. summoned you at last?"

She shook her head and pressed a single button, splashing the message she had just received on all the viewscreens. "No, it's worse."

"My god..." The man read the message again, trying to interpret its contents. "Why does he require an entire unit of each crewman's blood? Taken at every standard day? What use does he have for all that blood?"

There were plenty of uses, not that Selner knew anything about magic. Still, all the fantasy holovids portrayed the sorcerers who would use sacrifice and blood to power their magic as evil incarnates. Magic gained through death and torture was magic marked by death and torture. Even if you can achieve the most wondrous effects, it still could not rid itself from the taint of suffering.

Magic was bad.

"Nothing good I image."

When the Eviscerator finally docked alongside one of Vlessing's docking beams, the crew carried out their lockdown duties. The power generators was set in its lowest resting output. Weapon mounts were physically rendered incapable of activation. Engine thrusters were shuttered and screwed shut tight. That and millions of other tiny adjustments were made to the requirements of the space station they were docked with. No station wanted to have a hot potato on their hands. When the mercenary inspectors boarded their craft and confirmed the ship was locked down sufficiently to their satisfaction, they left and authorized entry for the crew (after sufficient 'compensation' of course).

One of the most puzzling of Claris' instructions to the crew was that, apart from a routine rotation of sitters, every member of the ship received liberty to visit the bars and brothers of the station. It was as if their new wizard captain was completely unconcerned that anyone would decide to desert or sell him out.

As the mark on their arms began to burn their veins, the pirates and former scientists quickly learned the same lesson Dr. Selner had been taught: there was no escape from Captain Kid. The career pirates shrugged and quickly went back on discussing which ugly whores they would pay a visit. That Harry actually paid their allotted wages, along with a promise to pay them their full share on the proceeds of the sale of the Helical Visage, worked quite a way of earning him their acceptance.

The civilians however were not that easy to please, and most had no intention of soiling their reputations by being seen entering a "vulgar establishment of hedonistic exploitation.", as Dr. Selner had firmly described. Professor Zhang, more mindful of his role on the ship as the supervisor and facilitator of his subordinates, had suggested a favor from Claris a day before their arrival.

"My men need something to do."

Looking up from her digital paperwork (what the heck was paper anyway?), the queen of the ship glanced at the aging academic with a questioning eyebrow. "I beg your pardon?"

"My former, and I suppose my current subordinates. My science team. They're not adjusting that well to their new lives on this ship. While you've graciously given them some shore leave, they won't go in on that offer. Entering a closed environment infested with mercenaries and criminals won't give them the opportunity to relax."

Leaning back on her plush, formfitting chair, she folded her fingers and asked, "What would you have me do then, Zhang?"

"As I've said, let them accustom themselves to their new way of living by keeping them busy. If there is anything we science types are familiar with, it is diligent work. Just give them some errands outside the ship that will take them a few days at least to finish their workload. They'll be able to learn that our new way of life isn't all that bad once they've done business with a few locals. Just don't confront my boys and girls with the nastier figures in the trade."

"Hmmm..." The second in command thought over Zhang's proposal. While it did sound like a solid idea, she was not quite willing to readily accept a flunky's suggestion. It would make her appear weak and impressionable to the crew. Also it would rip apart her entire instruction set and timetable. The man could have at least come up with this suggestion sooner than merely a single day before their arrival.

"I'll put a directive in the commandnet that will give you the authority to schedule your subordinates' shore assignments." The lieutenant pressed a few other buttons and composed a short message. "I've put an official record in the logs that I've given you the task to manage your men and insure their success in their assigned missions."

She didn't mention that the logs would state the idea had come from her and her alone, leaving none of the credit to Zhang. The professor probably suspected, but it was hardly an issue worth disturbing their busy captain.

With a friendly nod, Zhang turned around to leave the lieutenant's stateroom.

On his way out, Claris added a small warning. "I'm holding you personally responsible for the success of your men. If I find out that

even one crew member failed in his or her task, I will take it out on you."

A short pause. Then, he continued on his way. "Understood."

While Harry rather liked to stay cooped inside his cabin, he couldn't very well refuse a summons from the station's owner and boss. With only a single ship and restrained in the intensity he could perform his magic, he was forced to get used to a position well below the top of the food chain.

'I'd be able to disembowel everyone on the station if only I had my books and a cure for my debilitating curses.'

Alas it was not so. Absently, he considered meeting the governor with his current battle outfit. Then he thought it might pay to fit in, even if he lost some vital protection. A quick glance inside Hargrave's closet quickly dissuaded him from that option.

'No way I'm going to wear those ridiculous clothes. They're either so formfitting or extravagant that I would either feel naked or look like a pimp.'

Shrugging, he cut his thumb and ran the wound through the top length of his wand. Casting a small charm, he was able to simulate the running symbols over his clothes without drawing any energy from his core. While blood acted as a modest substitute, all spellwork was eventually meant to be drawn from personal magic. Otherwise, every two-bit squib would be able to cast archmage-level spells.

Finishing up, Harry approached his door and opened it, only to come up to the sight of a fully dressed up Claris.

"..Wow. You look... wow."

"Well, master?"

"You're so.. how do you say it.. classy."

Classy was indeed an apt description, and exactly what the beauty-conscious woman was hoping for. She could have gone for any low-

cut outfit that would draw a lot of attention to her exposed curves. Somehow, she didn't think Harry would fall for it though. With a third of the crew on the ship fully women, he could just grab any number of them to satisfy his urges. No, the key to compel him with her beauty, but not her sexuality, was through rising herself above that common level. She was not just his groupie. She was his queen.

Harry's eyes tracked her alluring figure as she twirled around for him. The blood red dress was moderately thick and reached down modestly towards her knees, and the fur jacket over her torso gave her the illusion of luxury. Her stiletto heels exposed her shiny manicured toenails that matched her elegantly pointed fingernails. Her trusses of dark hair was put up and woven into a circular braid that accentuated their silkiness. Her pale powdered face covered her faint natural freckles, giving a mirror of perfection, only interrupted by her deep shade of crimson-tinted lipstick. The only feature that even hinted at her subordinate position was the small black choker around his neck. A small line of electronic characters circled over the strip: Harry's.

In effect, the entire outfit was so far removed from her usual functional uniform that Harry had no choice but to see her as a woman. On this particular outing, the Second became the very definition of femininity.

"Eh.." The admiring boy eventually closed his gaping mouth. "I thought this was just suppose to be a social call." He actually looked sheepish for the moment, as if he wasn't a spell-slinging murderer who could rip off someone's soul from their bodies. "Am I underdressed?"

Such a silly question for a heartless woman abuser. "Of course not Master Harry. You look just fine. It's very unique; you might set a new fashion trend."

They both chuckled a little at that. With the ice having been broken, Harry began to reassert himself a little and offered his hand, which Claris accepted with refined grace. The pair led themselves to the main airlock out to the station, drawing excited glances from every crew member who passed by, particularly the men. Claris took the stares without any acknowledgement. Harry simply basked at the glory of being the partner of a gorgeous escort.

Cleveland, manning the guard post at the closed entrance himself, saluted both of them. From the way his eyes tracked with their movements, it seemed even he wasn't immune to Claris' allure. "S-Sirs!"

"Chief Cleveland." Claris greeted. "How goes the recruitment process for our new boarding crew?"

The man pulled his eyeballs back up from chest level and gave his brief results. "The local peoplenet is pretty typical to this season. You got the usual dregs who'd shoot their own feet before they hit the enemy. Then you got the retirement-age veterans who charge at least thrice for their services than they are actually worth. Getting any solid people which doesn't fall between the two is impossible from the open net. I'd have to scour the local joints on the station to flush any of them out."

"Well, do as much as you need to. With the proceeds from our latest bounty we won't be lacking in cash, so don't skim yourself. With a crack boarding crew in our midst, we'll be able to take riskier jobs. The expense will be repaid quickly then."

"R-right. I'll take that into account ma'm." Nodding again, the man unlocked the restraints keeping the airlock shut. As the pair were about to enter the decompression chamber, the Chief of Security asked, "Master Harry? Can I make a direct request?"

Puzzled and a tiny bit annoyed, Harry paused in his steps and turned to face his minion. "What is it, chief?"

"Well, it's this rifle here." The man held up his artificed beam rifle. It's bizarre mix of colored components distracted from its devastating strength. "This beauty is nothing less than a miracle, truly sir you are blessed with golden hands."

Seeing that Harry's impatience was growing, he quickly got to the point. "If you can make more of these rifles, enough to equip a full squad at least, then I'm sure many enthusiasts will climb all over themselves to join us. Only the Terrans and Martians have access to Class III infantry weapons, and they don't export their stuff. Everyone else here is just dying to get their hands on them. If we get some of the word out on the street that we got the gear, then it'll just be a matter of picking the cream from a very large crop."

If Harry wasn't feeding the curses set upon his body with every expenditure of magic, then he would have accepted the suggestion without a thought. Now however...

Taking out a pad, he ran some numbers on his calculator. Cleveland looked anxious while Claris was a bit miffed that Harry's attention had been drawn away from herself. This was supposed to be a magical moment for the both of them.

"I'll do it," Before the boarder could make a whoop, Harry held up his hand. "But only if your recruit can provide at least two liters of blood per rifle, along with an existing weapon and some other junk you can throw in. I don't care where you get the blood from, if it's from multiple people, or what blood type it is, as long as its human and fresh. Not a day older."

The warrior pirate looked a little wide-eyed at the gruesome condition, but he eventually nodded. "I'll manage somehow, sir. You'll get your blood!"

Before the soldier could even begin to salute, Claris quickly grasped Harry's arm and pulled him through the inner airlock, letting the exit close. The warmth of her body radiated through the folds of his ancient dress. Caught off-guard, Harry eventually eased his tensions and made himself comfortable alongside his partner. That he felt her breasts press ever so gently against his arm was reason enough to be content.

He hadn't felt this way since Ginny had died. That was ages ago. Perhaps he could relearn to enjoy this warm sensation in his heart.

The outer lock opened, greeting them to a sort of terminal with plenty of workers and crewman about. Dock workers were offloading previously raided cargo, while other suppliers delivered truckloads of provisions and reactor fuel. A few of his deck hands doubled as cargo handlers, having been trained sufficiently in the trade of warehousing and transportation. While the pirate profession was by its very nature chaotic, it didn't mean that everyone in the trade were clueless brutes. These outlawed spacers had to be at least just as good as their merchanter counterparts, and a select few could actually rival their military-trained counterparts.

Even at the top deck of the Eviscerator, the queen known as Claris did not fail to attract attention. As the pair walked down from the gangplank every nearby worker stole a few looks. It was not common for women to show themselves so brazenly dressed up like this at a rough pirate establishment. Even the female pirates, especially the lower ranks, were too caught up in the macho struggle to reveal themselves in that manner. Such women usually ended up being confined to a brothel.

Not that Claris had anything to worry. With the mighty wizard at her side and a command ring on her finger, she was invincible. The woman led the young man she accompanied up to a circular hoverpad. The device glowed blue in affirmation, and with a quick digital instruction the pad moved in line to the specially designated lane for the hoverpads. Local inertial compensators prevented the occupants from being thrown off whenever the device made a sharp turn. Few others were travelling in the same way. The rest had to go by transport or by foot.

"Wicked." The boy commented, letting out a childish grin that only hinted at his ferociousness. "They only had these geeky two-wheeled things with a dumb steering handle in my time."

"If you wish, we can buy a smaller one for your own use."

"Nah, let's not waste all that money. After all, we still need to collect a few hundred million credits."

Three hundred million was a humungous amount, enough to equip a small pirate fleet. That Harry casually mentioned the amount as if he could easily obtain it made the Second's spine tingle. This magician was special.

They entered the entrance to the main hub of the space station where all the main facilities were located. A small but well-armed checkpoint blocked access to every kind of traffic, including theirs. As their hoverpad moved first in line they were greeted by a trio of heavily armored mercenary enforcers. They looked nothing like the haphazard pirate crewmen who were entering and exiting the terminal. These stream-lined badasses actually looked like they could defeat Hargrave's entire old boarding crew and play chess while they were at it.

"ID chit please."

Before Harry could wonder what the heck an ID chit was, Claris withdrew a pair of thumb-sized cubes and handed them over to the mono-eyed helmeted soldier. With the ease of practice he slotted them into his wrist mount. The device beeped and the man handed back the cubes. Harry took up his own and slid it into one of his pockets. He'd examine it later.

"Claris, alias, executive officer of the mobile carrier Eviscerator. No irregularities since your last visit."

"Harry, surname absent, captain of the mobile carrier Eviscerator. First shore side visit to Vlessing Base and first registered port-of-arrival. A moment please."

The man headed into his small workstation, inputted some commands to his console, and then came back out. A printed plastic-like sheet was handed to Harry.

"Please observe the following regulations. First, this is a pirate base. Therefore, there is no police and no enforcement of any laws. This means that any Vlessing Base authorities are not going to help you find your lost wallet or kidnapped daughter or some retarded shit like that. If you want justice, just grab a gun and shoot the motherfucker who crossed you. Better yet, don't show yourself on the street at all without any weapon, or you'll just attract desperate muggers like crackwank."

The man ran his eyes over both of them, noting only the single pistol along Claris' hip. "You better get yourself a gun real quick, son, or you won't survive the end of the day."

"Thanks for the advice, but my girl can cover us both." Claris shivered slightly when Harry said 'my girl'.

"Anyway, secondly, we don't like to be blown up. No one on this station likes to be blown up in fact. So if you decide to shoot it out, at least do it somewhere private so we don't get any bystanders killed. Keep the damage to Class IV or less. Any higher and we'll come down on you fuckers hard, and I mean REALLY fist-in-your-ass hard. No one likes some idiot blowing up a bulkhead and sucking us all out into open space. This also applies to your ship. If there are ANY

indications the lockdown has been lifted, then we will isolate that section of the terminal and blast your ship apart with our station's beam lasers. We also have a handful of fighters and corvettes along with a single frigate patrolling our perimeter so don't think you can escape. We'll get your ass, whether you're on foot or on ship."

The whole lecture was getting tired. Harry already had the basics covered in the sheet the man had given him. "Are you finished yet."

"Not yet, punk. Rule number three: in here, we are kings. Letat cest moo and all that Ancient Roman crap. Anyone you see wearing our colors or anyone under the governor's personal retainer is to be obeyed without question. It doesn't matter if any of us asks you to pull out your ID or wipe our shit-stained asses with your tongue. We ask, you obey. You obey, we happy. We happy, you can leave the fuck alive with both your puberty-deprived balls intact. It's as simple as that."

The enclosure raised its barriers, opening the way to the central hub. The mercenary stepped out of the way and waved contemptuously. "Now have a nice fucking day, asshat."

"What a friendly bunch."

"Everyone get's the same treatment, so don't take it personal."

Their hoverpad pulled into motion, leading them further into the resort-like interior of the space station. The sight was impressive. There were the usual drunks and whores around the bars and brothels. But there were also pawnshops and equipment sellers, dealing in everything from ship thrusters to luxury hydroporcelain toilets to the latest Venusian fashion, except it was two years out of date according to Claris. Shop windows showing off the latest personal weaponry immediately attracted Harry's attention. Rifles, pistols, launchers – even collapsible crossbows, if you can believe it. They were actually popular due to their stealth and unrecognizable components. At least, that was what the ad was screaming in his ears.

After ten minutes of seeing the sights, they eventually arrived at some sort of reinforced compound. Mercenaries of the same type that greeted them first scanned their bodies and filched them for any

weapons. Harry had managed to hide his wand so he wasn't worried, but Claris had to give up her pistol.

"You better give it back exactly as I've left it, or you'll regret the day you were born."

"Yeah yeah missy we heard it all before, don't worry. The govvie pays us good so we don't pull off any funny stuff."

The heavy double doors slid back, revealing a diamantine interior that spoke of wealth and extravagance. The layout and furnishings were actually quite typical to the old Victorian era mansions, with the crystal chandelier and double arced stairways. The carpets of radiant white fur were carefully patterned in hexadecimal, and the three-dimensional holopaintings that hung on the jewel-encrusted walls flowed into each other like a river of stereographic silk.

A single figure appeared at the edge of the hand rails of the floor above. His extravagant scaled one piece suit looked like it was made completely out of real diamonds, not the synthetic fakes that made up the interior. The bright lights and other reflections sparked along his entire body, obscuring much of his skin and other.. rather unwanted sights. His ridiculous outfit was topped by some sort of vomit brown horn-rimmed eyeglasses that flashed several random numbers per second, and a hat that could best be described as a ship in a bottle, except it was made out of crystal and the bottle conformed to his head shape.

The new arrival pumped both his fists outwards to make a ridiculous Y-shape. "Wuuuuelcome to my humble abode!" His fingers then folded out, spraying digital confetti in both directions. "You are in the presence of a great legend! Please do honor me by stepping inside my Fortress of Solitude!"

As Harry and Claris reluctantly moved further inside, their host began to approach them in his own extravagant manner. He landed his entire jewel-crusted butt on the top of the smoothened hand rail and slid the entire way down one of the curved stairways. His sliding motion along with the friction caused some sort of reaction, for the whole stairway along with its railings began to glow in different colors like a disco ball. Synthesized music boomed from all around them, supposedly to provide a majestic atmosphere, but having the completely opposite effect on Harry.

Leaning his head to his partner, he softly whispered, "Please don't tell me this is fashionable in this age."

Clariss smiled grimly, but left it at that as their host neared speaking distance.

The dirty blond man grinned excitedly as swept close, revealing his perfect set of diamond teeth. "Ah, Clariss, we meet again, and my oh my, you look bodaciously stunning, absolutely stunning!" With a total lack of propriety, the man knelt on one knee and grabbed Clariss' palm to slobber his lips all over her skin. The owner of the aforementioned palm managed to maintain a polite smile during the entire ordeal.

When the man finally stepped away and dab at his spit-covered lips with a handkerchief pulled out of nowhere, he met the male guest with an appraising eye. "And here we have the little wildcat who trounced the old dog Hargrave from his little junkyard throne! A complete stranger with no connections in any databases, no listings in any crime logs, and not even a mention in the bounty records. My, my, either you have the most capable data hackers, or you're really just some kid out of nowhere!"

This time Harry couldn't restrain his frown. "Who the heck are you anyway?"

"Oh how rude of me." The man held out his palm to cover his fake falsetto laugh. "Let me introduce myself to you properly. I am,"

He thrust out his left hand to the side. The entire left wing of the mansion exploded in a holographic cacophony of orange.

"The most Gracious,"

His other hand followed in the opposite direction, causing a similar explosion of light and sound to erupt in the other wing, this time in purple.

"The most Elegant,"

His left hand then slapped on top of his right shoulder, as if he was doing the Macarena. The floor lit up in yellow brightness and began to hum into a bass beat.

"The most Persistent,"

The right hand followed its opposite, making it seem he was an Egyptian pharaoh resting in his sarcophagus. The ceiling lightened into a shade of ocean blue, adding an electrical riff along with the other noise.

"The most Admirable,"

Both his hands left his shoulders and spread back out into a Y-shape, their motions trailing digital red dust that continued to float in the air.

Suddenly, the entire room dimmed into total darkness, cutting off all the myriad of sounds that were pumping in all direction.

Then, the chandelier lit into miniature novas, directing a colorless spotlight directly over the governor's crystalline form. His entire surface, even his exposed face, sparked with the scope of a miniature galaxy. After letting his guests admire his posture, the man bowed slowly and deliberately in a formal manner, the red trail of dust continuing to follow the motions of his palms.

The dust then took a life of their own, spelling the man's name in cursive handwriting.

With a calm and fairly normal tone the stranger finally announced his identity.

"I am Pierre Antoine Dolohov."

End Notes: Nothing special, just more boring stuff.

Captain Kid

Like any other cliché old bar, the one at the corner of the lower hub had a silly name. The Gwendolyn was one of many watering holes the Vlessing outpost hosted. Outlaw crewmen didn't have much money to spend, after all, and what they spent their hard-earned credits on was usually just booze and sex. The establishments at the station were therefore prime positioned to take advantage of the spendthrift nature of the freewheeling spacers, by sucking every inch of credits out of their pockets before the night was over. The Gwendolyn was no exception.

The place wasn't as much of a bar as it was a dump. Its interior was a slap dash job of corrugated metal and over-recycled plastics. The mugs were chipped psuedoglass that looked so foggy that a health inspector would get a heart attack if he caught sight of them. Cheap omnights that constantly needed repair caused the already dingy interior to darken even further at certain times of day. The bar stools, chairs and booths were stained with cigarette burns and spilled liquor. A few abandoned pool tables and other assorted staples were tucked in the far corner, all of them were too banged up to play a fair game, if any at all. With such a grimy state, it was surprising the Gwendolyn still even manage to attract any customers.

The Eviscerator's bridge crew happen to frequent this watering hole quite often when they were in this port.

"Hey Jennings! My favorite navigator!" The fat proprietor yelled from behind his bar. A couple of solitary chain smokers puffed their cigarettes in front, practically obscuring the owner from sight. "Heard you were back in port, along with another tidbit of news. Is it true that old Hargrave has kicked the bucket?"

The eldest amongst the bridge crew nodded. "Yeah, it's true, Cilder. We got some skinny kid in charge now."

"A kid? How did that happen? Can't you overpower him and take control over the ol' Evie yourself?"

"Hah, don't fool yourself." Stacy, the weapons officer, interjected as she led the party to one of the roomy booths. "If you try to pull a fast one over Captain Kid, he'll spit you right out in pieces!"

Jennings, inputting everyone's orders in the display integrated in the table, concurred with the sentiment. "The old cap along with more than half of our boarding team were slaughtered like pigs. Don't fool yourself with Captain Kid's small appearance; he's a nasty piece of work and a butcher at heart. Heck, half the captain's I've served with don't even collectively measure up to Kiddo in sheer guts. It's like he's the devil's spawn himself, in more ways than one."

"Oh?" Cilder trailed as he poured in the mugs filled with the usual fare for the bridge crew. "So he's not just a regular psychopath?"

"The kid's completely fucked up." Helmsman Nicholas supplied with more than a slight undertone of fear. "Shit man, I'd rather have a knife plunge into my balls than suffer anything Captain Kid can dish out with his Stick of Death."

One of the other crew of sailors turned up at comment. "Wha-, deathstick? You pussies scared of a toddler wielding a wooden branch or something?" The man chugged the rest of his beer and barfed half of it back out over his shirt. "Ohh, look at me, I'm a big mean pirate who killed hundreds of people but I'm all shivering in terror cuz of this scary baby!"

The entire room lit up in amused noises as others began to make baby sounds. "Coochie coochie coo, pirate want a diaper?"

The crew of the Evie just sat and folded their arms as the jokes continued to be thrown around.

"Laugh all you want, boys, because it'll be the last thing you'll do if Captain Kid finds out."

The warning went largely unheeded, however.

"Fuck no man, maybe we'll pay a visit to your little ship and see how big and scary this tiny captain of yours really is. I mean, how hard would it be to put a laser through his forehead?"

"You're welcome to try, boys." The Evie's weapons officer offered grimly, already sure of the bloody outcome. "I won't shed a tear if our little Kid met an unfortunate end, but don't expect any help from us or any other Evie. Kiddo will just kill us all after he rips the kidneys out of you lot first."

"Sounds good." The lead pirate responded confidently, gears already turning in his drunken head. "Looks like the Evies won't object seeing their new captain getting offed. So who's in for a hit job?"

Another pirate chipped in. "Hey, that's a good idea, Vinson. I know some boys back at my barge who'd like to enjoy some easy pickings. I mean, how hard would it be to snatch that beauty of a mobile carrier away from his cuddly whiddle fingers?"

The dominant pirate chuckled savagely as he interacted with his holopad. Already he had a crew of five well-armed brawlers onboard for this little side expedition.

"Like taking candy from a baby."

The dining chamber was as resplendent as the foyer. Smooth crystalline lines and sharp geometric angles created a sort of pyramid enclosure that focused the eyes towards the center. Water and motion took the stage here, with several transparent aqueducts running crisscross over everyone's heads. Their complexity and reconfigurable structure must have cost quite a fortune to set up. Floating staves of quartz provided harsh illumination. Their dance in the air caused the reflection and shadow to constantly morph into different shapes.

In the middle, a three-sided table was already set with a small luxurious banquet. Icicle chairs chilled by insulating film awaited their guests. Without further ado, Governor Dolohov (or Pierre as he preferred to be called) landed his diamond-covered backside on the freezing chair and started in on the meal with gusto. Shrugging, Captain Harry and Lieutenant Claris joined in at a more sedate manner.

'At least people still use forks and knives in this time.'

As Harry tried to pick something that didn't look like it was regurgitated out of a pig's stomach, Pierre began to make conversation.

"So please tell me, my esteemed Harry, where you actually came from. Are you a Terran or Martian exile? A Plutonian nobody who

came out here to make a fortune? Or a Mercurian fanatic out to harvest more lives for your sun god? Please do tell me all your juicy secrets."

The dining wizard had no intention of spilling his guts. Instead, he smiled sardonically and remarked, "Why, my secrets won't be as juicy if I tell it to you straight. I'm sure you'll find it more of a challenge if you can wring out my story from other sources."

The Dolohov tipped his ridiculous crystal ship-in-a-bottle hat in reply. "Touché, my young detective mystery. I do find it so enjoyable to dig out the truth out of you newcomers through my extensive network. I have many connections, you know. Have you checked out my profile page on peoplenet? I've got 119,005 friends. One of them will surely know someone who knows someone else who you've been into contact with. It's all what people in my business do. So tread carefully Harry, lest you slip."

The only thing Harry wanted to do was throw away the plate of cow testicles he was munching, and immediately Legilimens the annoying git. The name was too much of a coincidence. Was this guy related to Dolohov the Death Eater? Was he even a magical of some kind? Did this new Dolohov knew Harry was a wizard as well? There were so many questions tumbling in his mind that he could not bear to enjoy his dinner peacefully.

He couldn't just grab his wand and sling a couple of spells at the crystal-garbed clown. If there was one thing this Dolohov had demonstrated, it was that this compound of his was hidden with an abundance of high-tech gadgets. All the light shows and floating holograms and other vain decorations might just be a decoy to the real dangers lurking underneath. Heck, an embarrassment such as Dolohov couldn't possibly accumulate this much power from his more saner rivals without having an ace up his sleeve. Was it magic, or some evolved variant of it? Without any further intelligence, Harry was constrained in his options. He couldn't reveal himself too soon.

"Can I ask you a question, Dolohov?"

"Why certainly, my esteemed Harry, but only if you would but call me Pierre." The man's glasses glowed bright red that coincided with his emotional state. "Dolohov is such a distasteful name. It is so.. un-French. Ugh."

"Ah, Pierre then, I was wondering, it happens that I knew another Dolohov back a few years ago."

Pierre's eyebrows widened, and with a diamond grin he leaned forward in rising interest. "Please do tell me more, young man."

"We ran in different crews, y'know, so we weren't all that close. He was your age likely, but he was a bit scruffier and had darker hair. We were bumping on each other's territory, so eventually both our crews had clashed a few times. My side won in the end. Don't know what happened to that other Dolohov fellow though. He might have been killed, but I haven't really paid attention to his fate."

"How.. interesting that a namesake of mine would have clashed with you." The man chewed on his spoon, actually cracking the eating utensil with his hardened teeth. "So I would garner your crew took over the city or colony? How is it that you suddenly ended up here then?"

The boy shrugged dismissively. "I had a few.. disagreements with my old crew. They just stabbed me in the back and offed me out into space. Grateful fellows, they are."

"Ah, that does happen quite often to the best of us." The man grinned slightly wider. "Might I ask, are you planning to take revenge on your crew? Is that why you took over the Eviscerator?"

"Maybe, maybe not." Sampling the wine, Harry mulled over his next words carefully. "I already left a farewell gift to them so I'm not terribly interested. I'm just out to make a new life here, see all the wonderful worlds and such."

"And you just decided to grab a random pirate ship for your own needs, hmm?" Pierre turned to Claris, who was doing her best to be unobtrusive. "My dear Claris, did you perhaps had a hand in this transfer of ownership?"

Her bright red lips snarled a little, though in good humor. "Why Pierre, I resent such brazen accusations. My hand had nothing to do with Harry's rise to power. It was all him."

"My Second exaggerates a little." Harry added as he lightly squeezed Claris' thigh. It wouldn't do for the worshipful woman to hype up his prowess. "My takeover wasn't as impressive as it sounds. The crew were fed up with the menial jobs, and I just presented them with a more thrilling alternative. How easy it is to sway a disgruntled crowd. Good leadership is often underestimated, wouldn't you say so, Pierre?"

That put a pause in their conversation. Harry picked at his food, trying to ingest as little of the disgusting dishes on the table as he politely could get away with. Claris serenely ate on as there was nothing unusual, while Pierre himself seemed to have lost half his appetite.

Then, the host abruptly put down his utensils and faced his guests with a serious expression.

"My dear Harry. Too often one can find itself under the direction of either a tyrant or an incompetent. The qualities of good and caring leadership are often unappreciated, as you say. You can either suffer under the toil of unappreciated labor, or rid yourself from your cuffs and rise to a level of power than none of your former masters will dare to take you back. That is exactly what I have done."

He spread his hands out, trailing a little red dust in his motions. "This is my personal empire! A dominion where none stands higher than I, the Great Pierre, the Enlightener, the Bashful, the Talented. Here, safely tucked in my self-designed fortress, I can finally be what I really am and express myself without facing the mockery and disgust of the uncouth masses. It matters not how far my tastes run away from the norm, for in this space station it is I who hold all the strings. If anything, the sheep actually complement me for my cutting-edge fashion. The ignorant are so self-serving this way."

The wizard set his own glass down and took the time to formulate his own reply.

"But are you content?" He gestured towards the floating quartz crystals and the rest of the gaudy interior. "Sure, you've built yourself a nice fantasy castle and staffed it with people who won't laugh in your face, but do you really think you can escape from the rest of the world like that? All you've managed to do is delude yourself with the lies of your sycophants. In reality, you really don't

amount to much. Compared to the big boys, you're still the lonely kid stuck in the sandbox."

Lips twitching, Pierre visibly glared at the indignity. "Those are very brave words, young man. Most would not even conceive to criticize me in the middle of my own defenses. After all, I can make your life very miserable for you and your little tugboat that's docked at my little station."

Slightly worried, Claris tried to intervene, but Harry squeezed her thigh yet again, not willing to cope with any interruption. "Am I not doing you a favor? I'm telling you the picture straight the way it is, not the way you like it to be. It is all too easy for power-hungry leaders to get caught up in their own warped perception. A cold shower or a slap in the face might be all that is needed for them to wake up from their daydreams."

Taking his glass, Harry gulped down the rest of the contents and threw the glass back down. He rose from the freezing ice chair and dragged Claris up with him. Taking the trouble bow to the host in appreciation, Harry also shot his parting words.

"I enjoyed our little lunch, but forgive me if I am a bit unaccustomed to such sophisticated tastes. My vulgar tongue is too used to simple grub. In any case, may your fate wind up differently than the fate of your namesake in my past. Good day, Dolohov."

Their steps out of the crystal dining hall echoed throughout the entire chamber. Pierre Antoine Dolohov was left alone to ponder Harry's words with his mostly-untouched banquet. He had to admit that Harry was something else, and that the meeting ended differently from what he imaged.

Still, despite having a bite of all his favorite dishes, Pierre still suffered from a foul aftertaste. Some things he just couldn't swallow.

"You'll regret insulting perfection, Captain Kid."

Despite the use of mobile carriers, the corvette class was the most prevalent choice in the piracy trade. They were easier to manufacture, subjected to less regulation, and combined nimbleness with toughness. Corvettes were gunships that were

meant to tear apart fighters, but they worked equally well in batting away mercenary escorts and forcing a cargo hauler to heave to. Their speed insured that no transport could outrun them, while their relatively thick hide for their size meant that they could glance off whatever civilian-grade turrets could throw at them.

Of course, they were dirt cheap as well. It wasn't rare to see pirates purchasing their own corvettes after a string of extremely successful raids.

While they couldn't match up to the larger frigates and mobile carriers in firepower or endurance, their abundance insured there were plenty of other corvettes to team up with for a big job. This allowed for like-minded pirates to engage into a temporary relationship and overpower a corporate convoy. Those kinds of transports carried far more valuable trade goods than what any single independent trader had access to in the open market. The risks were well worth the plentiful bounty that could be gained.

However, actually gathering up a band of selfish and egoistic pirate captains and convincing them to work together under a single command was quite a challenge. The risk of getting ambushed or double-crossed was too great – and often such treachery had actually come to pass. With neither laws or honor to back up an agreement, any such visionary leaders needed to rely solely on trust and charisma to keep every participant in the game.

Matsas had the fortune of participating in such a highly daring raid. Captain Hargrave, then still a risk-taking corvette captain himself, used all of his personal gravitas to band together a force of five to for an audacious smash and grab job on some Fonven Corporation gold train. With Hargrave's calm direction, all of the corvettes had managed to barrel through the unprepared escorts, hit the cargo haulers hard, and made off with a container of the shiny yellow metal back into the Jupiter Outback where they lost their pursuers.

The corvette captain would never forget that glorious adventure in his life.

"Captain!" A runner yelled as he finally managed to arrive at the bridge of the corvette The Vortex Spine. "I've got urgent news, skipper!"

The bearded heavyset man rotated his captain's seat to face his subordinate. "What is it, Vladinsky? Don't tell me another one of my sailors managed to get shot?"

"No, sir, it's something bigger than that. Chief Vinson is gathering up all of our crew along with a few other boys to make an attempt on the Eviscerator's new captain!"

"What?" The man slid his pudgy ass off his cushioned seat and looked out of the viewscreen towards the bigger vessel one docket down. "I heard about how ol' Hargrave kicked the bucket from a young upstart, but Vinson's a fool if he can just overpower a crew of forty with only twelve or fifteen at his command."

The runner shook his head. "It's not like that. The Evies don't mind seeing their captain dead, so they won't resist whoever's taking over. Also, we heard that the kid captain is out shopping in the hub with only a single escort, so we can overpower him easily and pry the command ring off his finger."

"Dumbasses." Captain Matsas collapsed back in his seat and leaned his head against his knuckles. "The idiots. I know Hargrave. I met Hargrave. And you know what? He's one of the best captains in the trade. He's anything but a fool. Whoever got rid of him and somehow prevented a mutiny must be good, real good. Vinson probably doesn't even realize the kid's likely a fake. Heck, no one with a command ring would go out on this port with only one escort."

Both of them wallowed in silence. Eventually, the young raider broke the silence. "What do we do, skipper?"

Taking a deep breath and letting the air run out of his nose, the captain eventually brought himself back together. With steely eyes he pulled his laser pistol from his hip holster, but then put it back in its holster and sighed again.

"What else can we do? We wait. Either Vinson will succeed and he'll be off my hands. Or he'll die along with the rest of my crew, leaving us stranded and possibly facing a very irate young man who has already killed one captain."

The two set about sealing the entry hatch and fortifying it with whatever they could shove in front of it. The pirate corvette wasn't going to change hands without a struggle.

After Claris had retrieved her beloved pistol, the pair hovered around the inner hub of Vlessing Base on their hoverpad. Harry wasn't really leading them anywhere. Instead, he was just distracting his mind by looking at all the weirdness going on in the lanes and behind the shop windows.

"Master Harry?" Claris began with concern. "Have I displeased you in some way?"

Her worries were lifted when he waved his hand away in an absent gesture. "Nah, it's just that Dolohov guy. He's... ugh. Even though he's so different from the Dolohov I ran in the past, I can't just shake my eyes to convince myself they're not related. I mean, how many Dolohovs are there in the universe?"

His Second retrieved her pad from an inner pocket of her fur coat and accessed a few databases. "According to the official records, there are over twenty-five million individuals with the surname Dolohov. Most of them are settled on Mars, but there are plenty Dolohovs amongst Jupiter's many moons. Maybe it's just a coincidence, sir."

The two travelled in silence for a while and enjoyed the sights. Eventually, on their third revolution, Harry ordered the hoverpad to stop besides a gun store.

"Master?"

Noticing the puzzlement on his servant's face, Harry sighed and explained his reasoning, mindful that they were still in public. "I might be powerful with my 'stick', but sometimes I don't want to be exposed. Remember, not everyone knows of my powers, and I'd like to keep it that way."

'Not to mention I need to be able to fight without draining my magical core. That reminds me, my servant's pistol is still keyed to my magic. I can't let that potential source of drain to continue, but if I downgrade her gift she'll probably take it badly.'

Oh well, he'd find another solution. First he needed to take care of his own needs.

Compared to the larger weapon malls stationed in the outer hub, the shop they entered was more akin to a boutique. The luxurious fabric interior and authentic wooden paneling (genuine from Earth) gave off an aura of aged refinement. Splendid examples of highly polished and maintained works of art rested upon soft satin pillows or hung up like trophies against a tall oak wall panel. The store's selection was fairly limited – mainly pistols and a few of the faddish crossbows, but pistols was all that Harry was looking for. The skinny grey-haired proprietor instantly shook off his dozianness and approached his new customers with customary eagerness.

The old man bowed and greeted Claris first. "Welcome to Stodgy's Vintage and Mastercraft Firearms! I am Ezekiel Stodgy, how may I help you, madame captain?"

Embarrassed, Claris made a small cough and gestured to her companion. "I apologize. You mistake us. I am merely holding the command ring for the real captain."

"Ah, let me make my own apologies then." The man brushed his gray stubble as he appraised the young man before him. "How can I assist you, Mr...?"

"Harry." He replied, and waved his hands at the displays. "I was hovering by and couldn't help but notice your.. antiques. Can you tell me more about them?"

The man's eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. "It's been so long since someone's asked about those treasures." He guided his customers to the front of the shop, where an array of sixteen different pistols were hovering silently before the thick armored display wall. "These solid-projectile sidearms are certifiably antiques. None of them were manufactured more than two centuries from their last and latest commercial production run. Most of these specimens are fully operational and tested extensively against flaws and abnormalities which might interrupt the smooth functioning of the antique. As long as they are fired by premium-issue ammunition, they will not break down."

The greedy grin the shopkeeper maintained so tightly hinted that, perhaps purchasing premium ammunition was not such a good idea. However, the only important fact was that these weapons actually worked.

"What's the oldest gun in this lot?"

The man frowned slightly at the term 'gun', but wiped it off his face. Instead, he commanded his suit to form a transparent film over his hands. Raising his covered palms, he carefully guided one of the hovering pistol to lower itself in his sterile grip.

"This is the PoleStar EET-55 Coil-Accelerated Revolver, or the 'Gauss Eater' as contemporaries usually called them. This brand of heavy sidearm was popular in the late half of the 22nd century due to its ruggedness and prodigious penetrating power. This particular antique replica was manufactured in 2334 on Mars and is designed to be partially compatible with VyneTech and Holarion's armament upgrade modules. With modern adaptors, this pistol can take full advantage of the latest enhancements such as optimal sniping, conditional trigger or heavy gravity operation."

Impressed, the boy stuck out his hand. "Can I hold the revolver?"

"Be my guest, although I would like to request you to seal your open palms first."

His helpful assistant solved his little dilemma by taking his hands in her own, and used her suit's functions to exert a plastic-like film over the skin of his hands. He nodded his thanks and turned to take the revolver from the proprietor's hands.

"Oof."

The gun was heavy, at least from the few handguns he had actually handled back in his own time. The revolver's surface was plain gleaming metal, so unlike the painted plastic-like pistols made out of the most lightweight and heat-absorbing materials. The coilgun was a puncher, a heavy fist that could smash through any flimsy ceramic-weave armor that was in abundant use at the time. The heavy caliber rounds carried an integrated magnetic charge that, when the firing pin was struck, would conduct the charge through

the coils sandwiched between the inner and outer barrel, flinging the rest of the round out at superhypersonic speeds. Proto-inertial dampeners integrated in the handle of the revolver barely bled off the monstrous kickback, preventing all but the most fragile wielders from breaking their wrists.

"For a small price, I can provide you with an alternative set of more modern battery-fed inertial dampeners that would fit in the handle of this revolver. They'll be able to negate over 99,9 percent of the recoil, insuring a smooth and pleasant firing experience. With your rather.. lean wrists, I would consider it a sound and prudent investment."

"No thanks." Harry turned the gun to inspect every corner of the gun. He cocked the firing hammer and tested the trigger. He opened the revolving chamber and looked at the six empty cylinders that would be able to hold the devastating rounds.

"What about the power of this gun? How does it stack up to modern pistols?"

"The thing is an antique, Master Harry." Claris snorted, and patted her own plasma pistol affectionately. "No one uses gauss guns anymore in battle for at least five centuries. They're too heavy, too bulky, too inefficient, and has a bitch of a cooling cycle. All that and they still have the punching power of a simple Class I kinetic pistol. There's too many compromises that, compared to sidearms that use self-propelled rounds, manufacturers have just given up on this technology."

The smirk that was plastered Harry's face was in total contrast to Claris' opinion. "Perfect."

"Why, an excellent judgment, sir captain." Stodgy followed up. "This design is indeed a marvelous work of Martian engineering, one of the pioneering products that established the Fourth Planet's reputation for mechanical excellence. Its historical significance in the First Interplanetary War has not been forgotten by most Martians even today. This was a weapon that changed history and drove an oppressed colony to succeed in its dreams to achieve independence. Much greatness has been achieved with this firearm, and I am glad such an appreciative young man such as you has such an appreciation of its legacy."

After a few more practical questions, Harry was finally ready to make the jump. "Okay, how much for the gun and a dozen boxes of ammunition?"

"Fifty thousand standard credits, and that is the final price."

Clariss, using her womanly wiles, conveniently managed to haggle down the price for a mere forty-four thousand. Clariss authorized the credit transfer, grimacing still from the exorbitant price for what she thought was a severely underperforming weapon. The cheapest pulse pistol knockoffs sold for just five hundred creds, and they could beat the antique revolver in almost every capacity.

The shopkeeper returned with an expensive-looking wooden box. Opening it, he removed the velvet inlay surface to reveal the boxes cartridges underneath, then put the fabric back over them before placing the pistol in the indent carefully. Stodgy finally closed and locked the box before letting go of it, making it hover in between them.

"This pistol holder comes integrated with shock absorbents, weather sealing, inertial dampeners, vacuum resistance, anti-corrosion coating, microhover engines, the works. It will keep your purchase safe from all but the most extreme or alien environments."

"Thank you, Mr. Stodgy. Have a nice day."

The pirates turned to leave, but Stodgy held up a hand. "Wait. I would like to pass one more story to you, youngster."

With a raised eyebrow, Harry turned to listen with Clariss close at hand.

"I have always believed the weapon chooses their wielder. Keep in mind that this particular variant, the EET-55/h11p, was commissioned specifically in mind for a great general." Stodgy made some sort of sign over his heart with his fingers. "A terrible, but great man, who achieved both terrible and great results with his leadership over the colonists. It was his pistol that fired the first round through the brain of an imprisoned Terran officer, igniting one of the most significant POW massacres in the history of the Golden Age of Colonialism. This particular specimen is not that pistol, but it was fashioned from the original assembly line, using materials

mined from the same deposits. This model is the great general's twin in every way imaginable. Treat it well, and keep it safe."

Harry listened quietly, then flashed a quick smile.

"Cool story, mister." The wizard trailed towards the exit with his puzzled companion following in his wake.

The door closed with a silent slam, leaving the proprietor alone in with his prized collection.

End Notes: April Fools!

Hit Job

Science in this day and age was the epitome of exploration. Far from the early predictions that humanity's exponential technological advances would lead to some sort of 'singularity', the advancement of science had instead stagnated to a crawl. In a way, all the big things have either all been discovered or calculated. Other, more minor results gained later would usually provide some new ways of thinking or new applications of existing technology, but rarely did they have as much impact on society as steam power or nuclear fission. The last great civilization-changing technology was the advent of the hover module, paving the way not only to cheap levitation, but also inertial dampening. Corporations could then not only levitate cargo beyond the gravity wells of planets, but also design spaceships that could accelerate faster without squashing the flesh of its occupants.

One would think that greater exploration of space would yield new exotic insights. The truth was far less glamorous. There was nothing earth-shatteringly different to be found on other planets that would lead to radical new inventions. People still used the same kind of engine thrusters, the same kind of weaponry, and the same kind of space ships. Incremental change was the norm. Great amounts of man hours and computational energy were spent on marginally improved designs that only resulted in a few percentage points of higher efficiency.

The science team of Professor Zhang were all aware of what they were committed to when they chose to pursue a science degree. It was a life of lab work and writing reports, of observing boring phenomena and explaining it to a crowd of uninterested fellow academics. It was hard to define yourself in such a depressing environment and carve out a meaningful existence for yourself.

But getting (magically!) ensnared into the service of some perverted madman and forced to run with his hard-line murdering pirate crew was a little too much excitement.

Science was slow. Science was methodical. Science was a logical progression of ideas upon existing ideas.

With piracy, you just rape and pillage your way through the universe until you get killed through sheer dumb luck.

Felicity did not wish to die, and neither did her two accompanying former interns. Hernandez, Gabriel and herself used to be part of the same working group, studying laser dispersion in extreme gravity conditions. They were suppose to drop self-contained experimental chambers down Jupiter's gravity well and record the signals the automated chambers would return to the science vessel. If her hypotheses regarding dispersion under such strong distorting effects were correct, she might earn enough accolades to advance her career by several years.

Instead, she was reduced to a simple turret engineer on board the Eviscerator. Goodbye doctorate, goodbye research funds.

"Jeez, are we even going in the right way?" The blonde vented, glaring uselessly at her outdated map. There was suppose to be a weapon mall at this location. All she could see was rows and rows of brothels. She turned to her colleagues for help, only to notice their straying eyes.

She rolled her eyes. "Get your heads outtah the gutter. Let's go. We're on a schedule here, boys."

"Aw Felly." Hernandez said as he grinned rather cheekily, ruffling his rough goatee. "Maybe we can just stay for a peek. Heck, who knows, maybe there's a place for you girls as well."

"You said it man." Gabriel added as he bumped his elbow against Hernandez. "Maybe we can get into the whole 'rape and pillage' thing a little early, for practice."

Unimpressed, Felicity turned and hastily made her way from the dodgy street. The two young men strained to catch up with her.

"Did we say something wrong?"

"Beats me, Gabe."

After asking a friendly looking bystander (and not getting mugged or anything in return), Felicity finally tracked down another weapon mall that was open for business. The three Evies entered the large facility, and came right face to face with a bonanza of weaponry.

To describe the large hall as a mall would be stretching it. The place was nothing more than a dingy hangar staked out by loads and loads of fences and black market agents selling everything from personal firearms to massive torpedo launchers. The noise and the cigarette smoke was already almost palpable this close to the entrance. The former Solardyne engineer had no idea that there was this much trade going on in even an outback pirate station. Everywhere Felicity could see, confident captains and authorized crewmen eagerly browsed the wares, inspecting their condition and asking detailed questions to the grizzled vendors. The mood was more akin to a bazaar than a mall.

"Pulse turrets for fifty thousand! Get your Class V and VI pulse turrets for your lovely corvette here! Only fifty thousand for a new one or twenty-five thousand for a used one!"

"Heya." Felicity greeted the Arabic looking man. "Watcha got for Class VI's?"

"Oh? What's the occasion?"

"We got a faulty one on the Eviscerator that has been rusting from the inside for like, a few years. No one amongst the dumb hillbilly crew even recognized the problem until we came along, and it's far too late to put it back to shape."

"Hmmm.. the Eviscerator..." The shawled man turned to check the name on the port listings. "Ah I see, a mobile carrier, quite rare in these parts. Not much pickings for such a big bird. Well, in any case, I got several good choices. What're your specifications?"

"Hmmm.. Gabriel, you got the list?"

"Yeah." The man withdrew a transsheet from his pocket and read the items aloud. "Class VI pulse turret, 0.1 second cycle time, minimum 200 burst capacitor, 360 degree rotation freedom, 175 degree inclination, gamma mount, double-barreled, Fourth Generation or later."

The vendor nodded and led his three customers to one of the car-sized turrets in the back of his spacious shop. "I got this double-barreled Holarion here that meets your requirements. It has only a few years of service before the ship she was used on was

dismantled. I managed to come across it when I was out trawling the junk yards. Its barrels are still unwarped and well within tolerance and there's barely any burnouts on its other components. You can't find a better deal than this little baby. Can swat the flies right out of space yes you can with this sweet package. Holarion Corp only makes the best, and this is a fine genuine factory copy here."

"What're you asking for it?"

"Forty grand."

The group spent half an hour inspecting the components, measuring any deviations or signs of wear while Felicity continued to contest the price with the stubborn vendor. He was eventually willing to go up to thirty thousand credits, but considering the little use the pulse turret enjoyed it was quite a good deal, all considered. Felicity signed the purchase agreement and credit transfer authorizations and arranged transportation back to the Eviscerator. Since delivery was quite a serious issue on the pirate station, these matters were usually handled on the spot. The vendor helpfully contacted a transport agent.

A young teenager who looked to be barely out of his teens came up to them and bowed swiftly. "Chaf's Deliveries at your service. What do we need to haul for you, missie?"

"That turret over there." Hernandez thumbed behind him. "Immediately, if possible."

"Sure." The boy chewed his supergum thoughtfully as he regarded the naval turret with a practiced eye. "We got a hauler available that can truck up to twenty tons, but it'll cost a small penny. Two-'undred-'n-fifty, no less."

"Alright, but this hauler better be rated to handle this load." Hernandez shook the kid's hand. "Bring it back to the hold of the Eviscerator. It's the mobile carrierdocked at the L-arm."

At the mentioning of the ship, the kid suddenly stopped his incessant chewing and widened his eyes. "The Evie? No way man, no deal guys."

"What's the matter, kid?" The turret operator closed in on the backing teenager, who was suddenly not looking very comfortable in their midst. "Is there something we need to know?"

"Jeez, you don't know? I mean, you seriously don't know what kind of shit you guys are in?" The boy babbled on as he started to make his escape. "Well, good luck with your soon-to-be-dead captain! I wouldn't want to be you guys when some new bastard takes over your little ship! Sayonara!"

The initiates of the Evie just looked at each other in dumb incomprehension. "Uh.. what was that all about?"

"Dunno, but sounds like the captain is about to be done in." Hernandez guessed, and turned to the turret vendor. "You heard anything like that 'round here?"

The man shook his head and tried not to be seen with the three people he had just sold a product to. "Don't want any trouble, shoo, go away, go away! Take your turret and leave me out of your trouble!"

"Geez, friendly service 'round here. How are we suppose to haul this thing all the way back to the Evie?"

"You idiot." Felicity knocked her fist against Hernandez' chest. "Didn't you get what the kid said? The wizard kid is being targeted and the entire ship might get taken over!"

"So what?" Gabriel shrugged. "If he dies, we'll be free from this curse."

The girl so wanted to strangle these two idiots. "Then what, genius? Go find a new place to work in the middle of a pirate base? We're no killers! There's no passage out for us! I'd probably end up in some whorehouse while you two get roped in some other violent pirate crew. Do you really think you'll end up better without Harry's protection?"

"Are you out of your mind, Felly?" Hernandez ripped up his sleeve and bared the black curse mark to his two friends. "Don't you hate carrying this brand? Don't you hate how it burns whenever you think of escape? Now that we've finally got a chance to escape that

fucking kid bastard, you're actually thinking you're going to help that scum?"

Shaking her head, the girl turned away from the two men and walked out of the shop. "I'm not wasting anymore words with you dickheads. If you don't want to help, fine, but I'm going to go back to the ship and warn the crew. Unlike you guys, I don't want to spend the rest of my life under someone who is likely to be worse than Harry. At least the kid's left us alone, y'know?"

The two men stood gaping as they watched Felicity leave towards the exit of the weapons mall. While they desperately wanted to be rid of Captain Harry's oppressive grip over their lives, Felicity's words did make more sense the longer they mulled them over.

"Shit man, I think we made a mistake."

"Sure did."

"So whatta we gonna do?"

Gabriel let out a clueless sound as he leaned against their turret. "Well at least Felly's warning the Evies. Maybe we can go find the captain and help him out."

"With what, our bare fists? We ain't got any guns, and you wanna go help the captain do what? Take a bullet for him while throwing rocks at whoever's going to attack? That's whacking crazy, y'know that? Besides, Captain Kid's got his wavie stick, what harm could he be in really?"

"But what if his attackers come up with a Class IV or something, Hernan? Do you think he can withstand that much punishment?"

"Beats me. Maybe he can wave his kickass stick and make the weapon go away or something."

"Most space fighters can't even withstand more than a handful of Class IV hits against their hulls." Gabriel remarked as he rapped his fingers against the control panel of their newly bought weapon mount. "You know what I think? I think Captain Harry's going to get himself all blown up if he's up against that much firepower."

They both sat on the circular indentation of the upright pulse turret, having nothing else to do. Both were lost in thought as they thought about their short lives aboard the Eviscerator and how that may end in the next few hours.

"You know, if we can hook some sort of power train and a pair of wheels on this baby, we could lend a hand..."

Hit jobs were fairly uncommon on Vlessing Base. That didn't mean they were all too rare of a sight. Most of the pirates and mercenaries frequenting the station had made plenty of enemies in their lifetime. Was it any surprise that some of them would seek the outlaws out and try to take revenge? It was practically in their job description. Still, the potential victims couldn't do much to prevent all the attempts, so they took the risks with a certain nonchalance and went back on their way. The most successful pirates would always care to keep enough guards around their person, but a small-time corvette captain was usually not so endowed. If one were to go out on the streets, well, just pray that you can shoot the bastard first before he shoots you.

One disgruntled man was something that any decent pirate worth his salt could handle. Two hired men, well, with luck the pirate could pull it off. But twenty seasoned pirates, five of them suited up in Class I Boarding Armor? That might prove a little difficult.

The ambush started off with a bang. In actuality, the noise came just after a Class III kinetic round impacted Harry's shield. The wizard was completely oblivious to the threat as he crossed the street to try out some interesting fashion.

Just because their target was a single kid didn't mean they would just gun him down. Vinson's crew may not be the smartest people alive, but they weren't THAT stupid. Despite their tendencies to underestimate their target, they still stuck to their old habits and approached the assassination as a regular hit job. They scoped their target, shadowed him to observe his weak points, prepared a killing ground and finally positioned themselves for optimal angles of fire.

The heavy alloy bullet pierced the high-powered shield charms Harry had cast over himself with the force of a speeding car.

The projectile then came up to Harry's dragonhide armor. The ancient resilient material held out for a few split nanoseconds, but even it had to part eventually.

With much of its lethal potency diminished, the bullet still held plenty enough power to pass through Harry's right shoulder.

The entry and exit wounds exploded into a great red mess that splattered the walkways around him. Screams settled all around as the pedestrians all ran away from what they saw was the start of a violent confrontation.

"Lord Harry!" Claris shrieked as she caught Harry's paralyzed body as it fell. With quick reflexes honed in the heat of battle, she quickly brought her pistol up while ordering the hoverpad to clear the area.

Sadly, the second kinetic round impacted the power module of the pad, destroying most of its critical elements and dumping both its occupants unceremoniously to the ground.

"Snap out of it, Harry! We have to find cover!"

Other fire started to erupt from all sides. The rounds were mostly kinetic, leaving Claris unable to confirm from which direction they were fired from. A few self-homing bullets had hit Claris dangerously close to her leg – only the overheated engine module of the hoverpad had saved her from being crippled as well.

"Harry!"

Lieutenant Claris, despite her relatively soft shipboard life, was still a swashbuckler at heart. So when she found her captain getting shot by a high-powered penetration round, she immediately used her command ring to set a ship-wide alarm. Then she activated the emergency regimen for her dress. Miniature particles weaved and morphed her gorgeous red dress into something more substantial and skin-covering. It still wouldn't measure up to real boarding armor, but it would at least provide protection for all the bumps and bruises she was sure to be getting.

In the meanwhile, Harry's wounds were rapidly clotting and closing. His breaths were becoming more regular and his eyes were beginning to return to their regular sheen. Instincts borne out of

dueling countless of capricious wizards had forced him of conditioning his internal magic to cast small internal healing spells over his wounds. It used quite hefty amount of magical energy, which couldn't be helped for the moment. The cursed wizard would deal with the consequences later.

"Come on, Harry, hurry!"

They crawled and stumbled towards the nearest enclosure, which was the shop next to the street. However, the shopkeeper frantically rolled down barricades that blocked his display windows and the entrance, leaving no opening for them to seek shelter inside. They desperately kept to the walls, and when an alleyway presented itself, took it with barely a thought.

A row of spacers stood ready and waiting behind a pile of hastily thrown debris. Pulse lasers and rocketed bullets flew towards their two victims with vicious intensity. Harry's weakening redirection charm was the only defense that saved him.

The two rolled back out the alleyway. Not mindful at the moment on how much magic he was about to waste, Harry grabbed hold of Claris and tried to apparate.

The art of apparition was a delicate one indeed. One must have a clear picture of his destination in mind, and hold it steadily in the front of his thoughts as he willed his magical energies to feed the desire to be at that location. Patience was required to feed just the required amount of energies. Haste would only botch the spell. Side-along apparition was exponentially more dangerous, not just because of the increase in mass, but also due to the inherent unfamiliarity another's body effected the desired picture. Just about anything could go wrong.

Sadly for Harry, the pressure, the grievous wound, and the general panic left him unable to jump back to the Eviscerator as he originally desired. He and his passenger disappeared.

And popped only one block ahead of their previous location and dropped in a tumble of body parts.

At least they hadn't left any limbs behind. After asserting that everything was as it was, Harry stumbled back to his feet, dragging

Clariss with him, and went towards something that looked like a warehouse. Clariss redirected him slightly towards a locked door. Using her Plasma Pistol, she shot a glob at the lock, melting it to ruin and leaving the door free to be kicked open by her reconverted boots.

"Looks like we got out of the killing zone." Clariss whispered as she checked the interior for any traps. "But we can't get back to the Eviscerator with the shape you're in."

They shuffled inside the dark interior and hid themselves in the midst of the massive color-coded shelves. They carried anything from engine parts, bulkhead plating, tubes, and many more ship components. As they went past a stack of fighter armaments, Harry jerked against Clariss' hand and stopped.

"This is fine. Cover my back while I work."

"Yes Master."

Clariss positioned herself away from the captain and held her pistol ready to fire anyone who threatened them. The injured wizard meanwhile opened one of his shrunken trunks and retrieved a small vial of blue glowing liquid. It was just one of five emergency flesh-knitting potions he had available. If the Wizarding World was really gone as he suspected, then this potion would have been priceless, not to mention irreplaceable.

He drank down the vile content in a single gulp.

Already he could feel its violent pain-wracking effects, Harry did not waste any time surrendering to the sensation. He picked up the still-floating gun box and threw the entire thing against the Class IV pulse laser mounts. The box clanked against the metal surfaces and quickly came to rest once it managed to upright itself. The boy wasn't paying attention though. Instead, he was completely immersed by the process of picking out a few select and rare magical ingredients from his diminishing stores.

A pouch containing just a few pinches of vampire dust. For its blood-draining properties.

An ancient chunk of mammoth tusk. For endurance and heat-absorption.

A flask of pixie wings, as fuel for the transformation.

As last, Harry withdrew one of his most foul possessions, something he kept secret even to his few friends. The tiny box contained a single finger bone he filched out of Voldemort's decaying corpse. He threw the dark artifact up along the rest, then cut his finger to draw a ritual circle on the dusty metal floor. He carefully weaved a simple pattern, and adorned it with runes and ancient power words. If he had more time, he would have been able to utilize a more efficient and powerful circle that wouldn't drain as much magic from him, but with the imminent threat hanging over them he didn't risk it. With a final touch he was ready to enact his spell.

"Dissasaguae."

The drying blood runes glowed in brightness as Harry leaked out parts of his magic. Invisibly, the curses that fed off his body latched onto the stream and sucked out a portion of it, forcing Harry to pump even more energy out. Still, he was able to feed enough into the runes that they were self-sustaining now. Relaxed, Harry wove his wand and sent a powerful pulse towards the pile of weapons and reagents.

The warehouse doors slammed open. Their pursuers have managed to track them down. But they were too far away to interrupt the spell.

A shrieking noise reverberated throughout the entire warehouse as the pulse lasers along with the gun box and revolver and even the ammunition started to disassemble. Whole chunks split off into hundreds of individual pieces as wires, chips and bolts became separate once more. With another wave of his hand Harry held out the picture of his desired end product in mind. Fueled by the benevolent energy of the rapidly diminishing pixie wings, the mass of components weaved and whirled around as they rearranged themselves around the disassembled pieces of the revolver. The vampire dust coated itself inside the cylinders of the chamber, while the mammoth tusk split itself in two, embedding itself between the folds of the grip and the coils of the barrel. A remaining chunk of the bone wrapped around the trigger of the gun.

Steps were closing in, and Claris began to fire at the fire passing shadow, earning a blood curling cry.

The single piece of Voldemort's skeleton reformed itself as the cock, replacing the mundane metal hammer of the original revolver.

When all was settled into place, Harry pumped out another string of energy that burned up the remaining pixie wings, initiating the reassembly process. The parts and components all locked together as the cloud rapidly narrowed into a recognizable silhouette. Energies streamed alongside it, hardening the bonds and letting the magical ingredients take effect.

Return fire spat in their direction. Harry's redirection charm managed to shield them both, but it was rapidly losing strength. It wouldn't last more than a minute at this rate.

The magical revolver was finished.

The product of Harry's artificing was a splendid fusion of magic and technology. Outwardly, it looked much the same, only slightly more massive. Its dull metallic surface had taken on Gryffindor red coating. Minute carvings of runes and other ancient symbols lay idle along the barrel and grip, ready to activate themselves once the weapon started to discharge. Part of its grip was replaced with wood, undoubtedly ripped from the gun box. The internal changes were not visible to Harry, but he could already feel the power the artifact hummed out as it awaited its new master. The boy reached out with his hand and let the floating handgun fall to his palm.

A personal bond established between the weapon and wielder. Harry grinned as he felt his power coursing through the gun. The cost was substantial, both in scarce ingredients and in the amount of energy he expended to facilitate the process, but it was all worth it for this splendid piece of craftsmanship.

"I grant you life.. so that you may take it in my name."

Cocking the Dark Lord's finger bone, he aimed the hefty barrel in the direction of the incoming fire and pulled the mammoth bone trigger.

The first action the heavy pistol took was not to fire its payload. Instead, its runes glowed to an ominous shade of chill. The pull it exerted over its environment drew the blood spilled from a nearby corpse towards the gun and into its ammunition chamber.

Only then did the gun actually fire.

"What's that racket!" Chief Vinson called in his comm bud as he and his entourage of armored boarders finally entered the warehouse after his lighter-equipped men. His Class II slug thrower rested tensely in his hands as he swept the darkened room with his infrared visor. Fading footsteps from other spacers lingered in between the dust.

The comm crackled. "The stupid kid managed to filch some sort of whacky pistol! Now they're both firing at us!"

"Do I sound like I fuckin' care? Just kill them and get this all over it. It's just a kid and a skank."

More fire reverberated, along with a second loud discharge.

"Ray, you still with us? Ray?"

Vinson slowed as he couldn't get any single response. Great. The whole plan was supposed to be a cakewalk. They surrounded the entire street. They occupied the high ground. Their sniper had a clear field of fire. Heck, the first bullet should have knocked the kid out right then and there.

But somehow, that blasted kid used some sort of gadget to turn him and his girl invisible. And end up a hundred meters away. Suddenly, all their fortified positions were useless. They had to abandon their high ground and go after the fucking kid before he could slip away and return with an army of his own. All thoughts of simultaneous assaults were forgotten as his crew brazenly followed after their targets in a trickle.

"..Vince?"

The chief halted and held his head over his comm helmet. "Ray? You still good yet? What the hell is going on?"

"It's terrible, chief! It's a goddamn fucking Mercury all over here! The bitch is bad enough with her plasma, but the boy is something else! The kid's got this huge-whack gun and he's spewing out this sort of fire bullet that splashes the flame all around us and we can't even get it to stuff them out and it's fucking horrible and jeezus just whack man it burns right through the suits and down to the bone until the bone itself blacks out like coal and the smell the horrible stink goddamn vomit laden helmet I had to take it off and—"

"Calm the fuck down, Ray! Now tell me why that kid ain't dead yet."

"We're trying, chief, we're trying, but the kid's got some sort of interference shield that whacks all we throw at him out of the way. Dunno man, Class I at least, and we ain't got nothing much 'sides a handful of pulse rifles and a few slug throwers. We could really use some EMP here really bad."

An entire portion of the warehouse just went up in flames at that moment. Vinson felt the weave of heat roll over his armor.

"Ray? Ray? You still there buddy?"

"..."

"Fucking great." The man cocked his shotgun and a single under-slung machete bayonet retracted from the holder. "Horser, ready your nEMP canisters. Dick, suppressive pulse mode. The rest, get your monoblades out and prepare to gut that sum'ova'bitch."

The six boarders trooped ever-closer towards the source of the illumination. The flames continued to burn down expensive components despite the water sprinklers. When they finally neared the source of the disturbance, they encountered the first corpses. They were men he once knew well in his life. Now, all they were good for was fertilizer. Nothing was left of their clothes and their flesh. Only bones and the melted remains of their guns were still present to mark their passing. Nothing else was left to identify the remains.

These were good men. Solid men. Men Vinson knew, men he worked with all his life. They had a good time together terrorizing the Jupiter Outback.

Now they were all dead. Burned by some kid with an oversized flame spitter. Vinson roared his grief and anger out of his constricted throat.

"Forget about that dumb command ring!" The Chief savaged through his comm channel. "I want that kid DEAD. Kill him with anything you got, grenades, boom tubes, whatever dirty trick you have to resort to. We owe it to our mates."

The men went after the hot trails of their enemies with steeled determination. They rounded the corner and came almost face to face with their two hated targets.

"Let'r rip!"

Pulses of laser bolts streamed forward in an incredibly dense spray, only to bend away at the last moment before impact. Vinson shot a blast of heated shrapnel from his boomstick, which resulted in the same dispersion. The woman that accompanied the kid shot back globs of bluish plasma on the floor before them, slowing them down and forcing them to go around the puddles of cooling death.

Then, the boy himself fired from his big-ass revolver. A loud boom erupted from its barrel as a bright lance of orange-red flame landed in their midst, engulfing one of their numbers completely. The impacted sprayed out other bits of highly corrosive flame nearby, forcing Vinson and the rest to dodge. The chief looked back at Gerard's form. His armor was a complete mess of melted slag. There was no way anyone could have survived the heat.

This has gone long enough.

"Horser, fire the boom tube!"

The boarder hooked his pulse rifle under his shoulder and shoved a blue cylinder into the underbarrel. He then took aim, taking into account the distance and the parabolic arc, and fired the nEMP grenade. At the same time, Vinson held his shotgun up to his eye and tracked the slow-moving projectile. When the grenade was about to encounter the interference shield, he let his shotgun rip another volley of shrapnel.

The tiny metal bullets impacted against the shell, detonating the grenade just before the perimeter of the redirection charm. Its electric blast tore through the magical barrier and other protections like a scissor. The boy visibly arched in pain as the electric charge ran through his body. But that was not the worse. Vinson's volley followed right after the electric wave front, pelting the two targets with dozens of projectiles.

Only the inherent protection afforded by the dragonskin armor prevented the bullets from perforating Harry's skin. The masses of impacts transferred a punishing amount of kinetic energy, created scores of bruises all over his limbs.

Claris was worse off. Her reformed dress afforded little in the way of battle protection. A handful of bullets embedded itself in her flesh, crippling her muscles and shocking her into paralysis. She was lucky the blast came from a fair distance. Any closer and she would have been run through.

Swearing loudly, Harry let loose another Fiendfyre blast with his revolver. The superheated spray landed before his pursuers' feet, blocking the way. The boy then hauled his critically injured subordinate over his shoulders and limped out towards the exit of the warehouse. He used Claris' plasma pistol to burn through the locks and barged his shoulders through the opening. They both disappeared back out to the streets of the outer hub.

"We got 'em on the run!" Vinson hollered in his comm, passing the coordinates to the others who were still arriving from the furthest positions. "Go around the back and hammer them! They're both hit bad. Just one more push!"

The armored boarders, finally managing to go around the flames that blocked the closest way forward, went through the same door that Harry and Claris passed through a minute earlier. The light from the overcast ceiling dome was considerably brighter than the dingy interior of the warehouse. It took a few seconds for their eyes and their polarized helmet visors to adjust.

The open street was empty. There was nothing but more warehouses in this section of the station, so there was usually no one around except for a few dockworkers and automated robots, but even they cleared the area when first noises of fighting started to

reach their ears. Nothing was supposed to be moving. Everything should be clear except for their half-dead targets.

There was only one thing wrong with this picture. There was an open truckbed in front of them, along with an upright Class VI pulse turret. Its sleek dual barrels lowered from its vertical position to face the new arrivals. A strong humming vibration whined from the turret's capacitors, growing ever higher in pitch.

"Captain Kid sends his regards!"

The Holarion Suppressive Pulse Platform fired its bolts of pulse lasers with the furious power of the truck's energy generator. If the turret mount had been hooked up to a proper power supply, the dual barrels may have been able to unleash its full Class VI fury. As it was, the quarter-powered pulses were well enough below the legal threshold to avoid the scrutiny of the station's enforcers.

That left Gabriel and Hernandez free to spray their deadly heat with abandon. The bolts tore through the flimsy walls of the warehouse and wrought havoc to the valuable equipment inside. The wildly diverging pulses blew containers of exotic gasses, scorched pieces of hull armor and caused flammable materials to go up in smoke. Maintenance robots went haywire trying to limit the damage, but they were quickly crushed by falling shelves. Water sprinklers and heavier fire suppression technologies were helpless in extinguishing the raging torrent. Millions and millions of credits worth of delicate equipment melted into slag or blew up into pieces.

As for the five remaining aggressors? They were just unfortunate to be in the way.

End Notes:

Retaliation

If there was one emotion that defined Harry's existence, it was anger. From his first year in life, anger was the emotion that got his parents killed. Anger was what he faced every day in his following years under the Dursleys. Anger was what he had to fight against in the form of Voldemort and his minions. Even after he defeated this threat, other jealous wizards didn't leave him alone. The entire world was angry at him, and the boy-who-won just couldn't take it anymore.

So he grew angry himself, let himself become the boy-who-became and struck back hard against his angry opponents.

It brought the entire world in full against his very existence, but he took it with the strength that has already borne the world once more. Like Atlas, Harry endured. Like Prometheus, Harry evolved. And like Kronos, Harry eventually cut his progenitor society's very balls. But as Kronos was defeated by his very son, so did the remnants of the Wizarding World eventually imprison the boy-who-lost in a crystal cage and sent him off to the very origin of the stars.

Perhaps they thought Harry would cool down. They were wrong. All they accomplished was to let the boy-who-left build his hate unhindered for nearly a millennia.

And boy, did the Master of Death had a beef against the entire world.

Now, safe inside a transport racing back towards the ship, he could only watch impotently as Doctor Selner tried to stem the wounds that his Second had incurred in the ambush earlier. The doctor worked methodically and professionally, all animosity towards Harry forgotten as she performed the only job that she was passionate about: saving lives. The mobile surgery kit she brought along as an afterthought was a great help, but even she couldn't perform wonders. Whether Claris would survive at the end of the standard day was to be seen.

"The checkpoint is just up ahead." Zhang called behind the wheel, who was also an able driver. Janis was riding shotgun, her beam rifle ready for any further ambushes. Cleveland, having quite some experience treating battle wounds with some rudimentary first aid knowledge was assisting Selner as best he could, which wasn't much. At the very back rested the big anti-fighter turret that Gabriel

and Hernandez had miraculously hooked up to the truck's power generator in little time. Now that the vehicle was moving however, the turret was pulled offline and would stay that way until the truck stopped moving.

"How come there's only you lot that came to my aid?" Harry asked as he tried to lean against the side of the truckbed. "I thought Claris sent a distress signal to all of the crew."

Cleveland didn't mince words. "You ain't got the crew's loyalty, sir. Only these bunch came because we thought we'd be better under you than under some other bastard."

More fuel to feed his flame of anger. He understood the cowards' motives, but held not a single ounce of sympathy for the dregs. It was time to prove that he was their Master and their Owner. The Oath of Submission he had laid down on them entailed them to be nothing more than his glorified house elves.

Thus, with a small sliver of magical dispersion, he invoked his first Power Word. "Dobby."

Selner, Zhang and the others on the truck were barely affected. They were the only ones to answer his calls to arms, after all.

Stacy's mark burned briefly, but settled down as the intelligent spirit determined she had indeed given aid by warning the ship.

The rest of the Evies on the ship or away on shore collapsed in burning agony. The spike quickly subsided, but the enduring pain still ruptured in their veins as a pull exerted itself over their consciousnesses. The pull was unnatural and disruptive. Its all-consuming directive overwrote the urge to do anything else but answer Harry's summons.

Drunken spacers dropped their mugs where they stood and walked out of the bars they frequented. Those who had been relieving their stress at the whores withdrew their cocks and left their girls half-satisfied. Others around the base and on the ship stopped everything what they had been doing and assembled themselves at the spacious hanger where they were first inducted in Harry's service.

There, they waited, unable to think of anything else due to the compulsion placed over their very freedom of thought.

Even after the hatch of the ship lowered down to admit the truck did they not waver in their singular hold. Even as Selner directed a group of stretcher bearers to haul off Claris' body, they were still weighed down by their burden.

Only when Harry exited the truck and approached the lines of crewmen did they finally break free from the hold. Most of them looked puzzled at each other, having no memory of how they ended up all the way back to the hangar bay.

Displeased, Harry pulled at their chains, forcing them to feel a portion of his wrath through their very veins. For only a few seconds, every disobeying spacer felt what it was like to suffer under the effects of a Crucio.

"Now that I have your attention, please listen up and shut the fuck up."

He put his wand back in his wrist holster and retrieved his new revolver with a bit of a show. He held the weapon ready against his shoulder as he paced back and forth.

"It seems that I have not been making my point. What is it to being my vassal that so repels you? Do you not enjoy the rewards that I can offer? Do you not think that I am working for your best interests? In my initiation ritual, I have made it abundantly clear that I am willing to reward good behavior with a few carrots. It seems now that I must also show my willingness to use the stick for disobeying my orders and act against my well-being."

He approached one of the environmental techs and pushed the barrel of his revolver against the man's skull. The tech shivered with hysterical panic as he desperately willed to run away, only to fail as his legs were unable to escape from the compulsion that held it down.

"Once, thousands of years ago a great civilization emerged on Earth. From just a handful of tribes, their people forged a powerful republic and an even more powerful empire. Its legions were many and their prowess was renowned throughout the world. But once in a while, a

legion breaks and runs from the enemy. Did you know what their generals did to these dishonored soldiers?"

Harry pulled the mammoth bone trigger.

The fiery lance that spat out from his revolver not only burned right through the unlucky technician's skull, but it continued onwards and scorched through the other two crewman who were part of the lines behind the front most one.

"The general decimated the legion. One in ten of the survivors would be sacrificed to serve as penitence for their dishonor. Disobedience was paid in blood even back then." Harry stepped back and allowed some of the bonds on his minions to loosen, letting them turn their heads to see the corpses and throw up the content of their stomachs.

Putting his revolver back against his hip, he finished his speech. "Afterwards, the general would leave the survivors alone, and the losses the legion incurred would be forgotten. I expect that you too will go back to your duties and obey my will without question. If not, well, just consider that you could be the next one in ten. Never forget this day, and never forget that vassals have both duties and privileges. Good day."

It would take a long time for the crew to regain their composure and return – properly chastened – to their duties. The hangar crew had the unfortunate job of sweeping up the remains yet again.

Wrath was the ever companion of anger. Anger was an emotion, a directionless outcry of frustration, a primal reaction to the evolutionary mechanism of fairness.

Wrath was the hammer of righteousness, the vehicle of vengeance and the taker of lives. It was the ultimate remedy of hate and the firmest dispenser of justice.

Wrath was what drove the human civilization. Inequality in society drove men to seek higher ambitions, and overtake their rivals by virtue of their might.

Wrath was Harry's eternal wife. And today, Harry was going to take her out to dance.

"She's going to be fine, boss." Cleveland offered as they both watched through the surgery screen. Selner had sterilized Claris' body and was in the process of removing all the bullets. "Wounds like these won't kill. You'll get your girl back in no time."

Despite Cleveland's misconception, Claris was not 'his girl'. She was, however, a valued servant and part of Harry's inner circle. She was his vassal, and he was her liege lord. At no moment by his side did the lieutenant hesitate or abandon him to his fate. Even when severely outnumbered and taking fire from all sides did she still shield his body with her own.

Service went both ways. She had been his shield, and he would be her sword.

Turning to his Chief of Security, Harry inquired, "How did your recruiting drive go?"

"Didn't have much time to ask a few of the boys. Got two or three who are definitely in. They can get the blood for you as well."

"That's good enough. Call them in immediately. I have a use for them."

The pirate boarder saluted and left the medical bay. The wizard then turned his attention to the other boarder, Janis.

"You. Take whoever you think can hold a gun without shooting themselves in the balls. Find out who my attackers were and which outfit they were part of. If anyone gives you trouble, just pass it along to me, and I'll take care of it."

"Y-Yes sir!"

After Janis' departure, there was no one else in the waiting room except himself. He stood resolute in kinship with his injured lieutenant. A small part of him wondered if Voldemort ever cared if Lucius or Bellatrix got themselves hurt. Did the snake bastard ever care even a tiny inch for his inner circle? Was the Dark Lord and himself the same in that regard? Harry knew not the definite answer, but he suspected the answer was no. The act of splitting one's soul meant splitting up one's conscience. Perhaps the part of Voldemort

that actually contained his ability to feel empathy was stuck in Hufflepuff's Cup and was destroyed when the horcrux inhabiting the artifact was annihilated. To lose oneself in fractured mirrors was something Harry would never follow in the Dark Lord's path.

He didn't need to cheat Death; he had already become the embodiment of it.

His hand lowered to his hip, grasping the handle of his artifice revolver. Harry had no need to carry a separate holster – the gun, unlike most of his crew, knew who it had to obey. His thumb fingered the piece of bone that acted as his pistol's priming hammer. The former boy-who-won found it somewhat fitting that he would continue the Dark Lord's legacy of death and destruction with this simple talisman.

"For neither can live while the other survives... eh?"

His hammer left Voldemort's bone and rested on the cylindrical ammunition holder. A normal revolver would rotate the holder to set the next bullet in position. Harry's changes had done away with that, instead relying on immaterial energy as fuel. Another function took the place for the bullet chambers. His thumb flicked the cylinder a notch, aligning the next empty chamber to the gunbarrel.

Fire cleansed. But some targets just didn't deserve cleansing.

A small chuckle erupted from his throat as his mind drifted off. In the meantime, Dr. Selner had finished taking out all of the shrapnel, and had let one of the facility's machines dress up the wounds. When that was completed, she instructed a pair of hover-droids to put Claris' unconscious body in a recovery vat where a gas of special nutrients and chemicals would accelerate her healing process.

When the exhausted doctor left the operation room, she was startled to come face to face with a waiting Harry. Somewhat fearfully, she stepped back, expecting another humiliation.

Smiling sardonically, the wizard removed his hand away from his revolver. "I require no comfort from you as of this moment. Do not fear my presence."

An almost impossible command, but it did ease her enough to put aside her hysteria and surrender to exhaustion. With a weary sigh Lilliane collapsed on a nearby chair.

"Before you ask, Harry, the patient is stable and will make a complete recovery."

"How long?"

"A couple of days in the vat to let the wounds close would make her capable of functioning in a limited capacity. I wouldn't recommend high exertions for a month, though."

A couple of days was a bit too long for Harry's comfort. He was well aware that he was leaning on Claris' leadership and expertise to keep the Eviscerator running as it was. Now, without a clear direction, and no obvious third in command to step in (Hargrave's third was Chief Gerchev), the situation might quickly go down the drain unless Harry appoint a suitable substitute.

He already had a candidate, but first he had to show Dr. Selner his appreciation.

"You have my gratitude. Helping her must not have been an easy decision for you."

Her piercing green eyes hawked the boy suspiciously. "I have come to terms with my.. dilemmas. Though I still find your methods and reasons abhorring, I realized that I cannot struggle against futility forever."

"So you do whatever good you can do, is that right?"

Lily nodded, not only because she knew that Harry would know if she would lie, but also because she wanted to stand up to her convictions. The smile she got in return from the boy was surprising, and not at all reassuring. There was no end to the capriciousness and pettiness of this monster in sheep's clothing. The boy looked as young as Zhang's youngest interns, but his mannerisms and many references to the past all suggested he had lived a life far longer than what any human should have lived. Age was a function of physiology. Old people were supposed to be in peace with themselves so as to prepare for their inevitable end. They were not

supposed to stay on living like Harry and grow insane because their mental development just didn't know anything better.

The wizard pulled out a small box from the folds of his ancient coat, and through some unknown scientific means, expanded the size of the object so his hand could go through. He rummaged inside for a moment before pulling out a very old and dusty vial containing a glowing blue liquid. Selner instinctively backed away, having been drilled into her mind that most natural glowing matter did so due to radioactivity.

"This is not a harmful substance." But he set it down on the coffee table an end's way from the woman anyway. "I once stated that I rewarded loyalty and obedience. You have certainly shown to follow both. Perhaps not for the reasons that I would most prefer, but loyal and obedient you are indeed. Therefore, in light of your service, I grant you this one single boon."

His fingers waved over the potion. "It is a magical substance created out of the ancient art of Potions Making. This potion, when ingesting its full dose, has powerful flesh-weaving functions that can knit cleaved flesh and put back tendons together in under a minute. I gift this rare specimen to you, to do as you wish. Treasure it, examine it, experiment with it, I care not. However, to make you believe in the power of its magic, I do have one request: try out a small portion of it on Claris. It will not heal her to the full effect, but it will hasten her recovery time considerably."

The doctor, both distrustful and unbelieving of magic, continued to stare at the glowing vial as if it contained a deadly plague. Harry left her there to attend to other matters.

When he later checked the security cameras, the vial was gone.

Professor Zhang was smart. He knew he was smart and had the tests to prove it. In a society that numbered a hundred billion human beings, one had to be pretty darn smart to achieve the title of associate professor. There were still far too little universities and far too many post-docs to pick and choose from. Only by being smarter, savvier and luckier than the rest was Zhang able to hold onto his title for fourteen straight years at the West-Jovian University of Technology. It was an immense achievement that earned him much

respect, even if the pay wasn't all that great compared to what he could earn in the corporate world.

Still, with so much competition and so much backstabbing in the academic world, a professor did not just have to be smart to hang on to his title. It was a mistaken stereotype that all smart people were socially inept nerds. In truth, the most successful scientists were actually the most sociable samples of their IQ range. You needed to be politically and emotionally adept to maneuver your way around the hectic halls of academic rivalry, making alliances and breaking them off at the most advantageous situation. You had to befriend lifelong friends and exploit their generosity ruthlessly when the time came. Everyone played the game, and the longer you were in it, the more skillful your opponents became.

That Zhang held out for fourteen years was a notable accomplishment indeed. But the fact that he lost was something that he could not quite get over with. His defeat was so severe and unconventional that he simply couldn't accept it. His rivals at West-Jove U. didn't simply manage to find a way to kick him off his professorship – they actually intended him to get killed by pirates. Only through an extraordinary stroke of luck did he survive the roundabout assassination. He didn't know whether that was a victory or loss, but what mattered most for now that he was in a position to strike back.

Oh, he wouldn't go in guns blazing. Why the hurry? While the flames of wrath was a powerful force, he was not accustomed to such a direct style of retaliation. He held his professorship for fourteen years, and conducted multiple studies over his lifetime that took many years to bear fruit. This would simple be one more project in his book. Vengeance was a dish best served cold.

Right now though, he had another hot potato to contend with.

"You want me to do what?"

The emerald eyes of his superior gazed unemotionally at his own. "It is as I have laid out on the table. I want you to captain the ship in Claris' absence. Become the next officer in the chain of command, if you will."

The exasperated looking professor felt ill at ease at the suggestion and tried to explain his viewpoint meticulously as he would to a thickheaded student. "I don't know how they viewed professors in your world, but in this age, we are nothing more than people with a little brains who happen to have extensive knowledge on one narrow subject. For me, that is materials science, not captaining warships. I do not even have an inch of the vast body of knowledge that is required to understand a space ship's working and to direct the proper orders to make it do what I want. If you don't mind me saying so, you are better off picking one of the other more seasoned pirate crew. Cleveland seems to be an alright fellow."

"I've already considered him." The wizard responded. "You're a bright fellow. Can you figure out the reasons why I would go for you instead of him?"

"Hmmm.. He's younger than me, but more respected. He's fanatically loyal to you by all accounts. He's a solid thinker and can be steady under fire. Not to mention, he knows all the basics about each ship department." Zhang laid open his palms. "I can't think of any negative quality that the Chief of Security has that would make him unsuitable for the job."

"It's ambition."

"What?"

"Ambition." Harry pressed on. "Cleveland is solid, but slow. He's so fixed in his ways that making lead anything more than a single boarding crew would overwhelm him." He pressed his finger against Zhang's chest. "You however, have the drive, the hunger to become more than what you are. I feel quick strongly in you the need to achieve some sort of legacy and make some sort of sense of your existence. You're smart, but smarts isn't the only trait that's needed to lead the Eviscerator. I've checked the net and I've found several self-help books that claim to teach you how to become a proper space captain quickly. I'm sure someone who has spent his entire life learning knowledge can incorporate that little bit as well."

"But.. but that's unreasonable. Sailing is a skill, a trade, something you acquire by doing. You can't just pick up a book and know everything there is to this art in a year."

"I'm not expecting you to master the nuances to the same degree as Claris. That's not why I picked you." The wizard stood up from Zhang's desk and walked over a digital panorama projected against the wall. It showed a picturesque image of Earth in all its glory. "I picked you because you're hungry, ambitious, and willing to fight to get ahead. You say you're not qualified, but you already master half of what is required to run a starship: leadership. People respect you. People fear you. Even Hargrave's old pirate crew know not to mess with you. That is the mark of a leader. As much as you'd like to portray yourself as Ravenclaw, I know you're a true Slytherin at heart."

The boy retrieved a small item out of his pocket and put it on the professor's desk. It was the ship's command ring. The ticket to power and the symbol of authority.

"Do you wish to be controlled, or be in control yourself?"

"I..."

"Think about it. I'll leave the ring on your desk."

And that was the end of it. From that moment on, Zhang officially became Harry's Third.

The hit job went exactly as Captain Matsas had feared. Of his entire crew of fifteen, ten were swayed by Chief Vinson to take part in the assault. Of that ten, only two trickled back. Their scorched appearance and haunted eyes told all him all he needed to know. Vinson had failed, and in the process taken the lives of most of his critical crew. Only seven were left to man the Spiral Spine.

Seven was enough, if barely.

With hasty deliberation, Matsas terminated all trading and canceled all ongoing transactions. He ordered all the crew to proceed for departure and lift the lockdown on the ship's systems. And just to be sure, he added that everyone should keep their weapons on them at any times. Still, the proceedings went on at a snail's pace with the loss of so much vital crew members. Chief Vinson was the only decent engineer the captain had, and now that he was dead his underlings barely knew which button to press. If things went on like this he'd be roasted on a spit soon.

"Put your backs together and remove the restraints on the engines already!" He ordered as he ran down the engine control room to take matters in his own hands. He shoved the clueless technician aside and configured the engine startup priming himself. "Good for nothing spacers, do I have to do everything myself?"

Slowly the ship lifted from her heavy slumber. Dormant systems received jolts of power. Fuel started to flow from the fuel tanks. The energy reactor itself spun to a higher frequency, raising the very consciousness of the vessel. The Spiral Spine was waking up.

And then, it all went downhill as a loud explosion tore everyone's attention away from their tasks.

"Shit! I thought we had a few minutes longer!" Matsas left the engine control panel alone and switched to the security visuals. The outline of a ship showed one red signal towards the hatch of the corvette. "Fuck, they breached the hatch doors!"

The captain quickly engaged anti-boarding protocols while simultaneously ordering all of his crew to fall back to the engine room. It was the only area on the ship where their invaders had to watch their fire or risk a catastrophic reactor meltdown. When the last stragglers arrived in the room, Matsas quickly sealed the hatch and ordered a few of his waiting men to barricade it with whatever wasn't bolted down. It might not stop them, but it might slow their enemies long enough to figure something else out.

Too bad they didn't get the time.

Their enemies didn't blow up the hatch with explosives. Instead, they cut it down with a set of heavy-duty laser beams. Six of them melted through the thick plating of the entryway and melted whatever else was in the way without any effort. From the power put into the cutting beams, Matsas guessed they were Class III at the very least.

That wasn't good. If an enemy was willing to employ a Class III weapon in the engine bay, then he was seriously at risk. Just one stray beam could hit the reactor itself, initiating a disastrous chain of events that might blow the entire ship. With Vinson out of the picture, hardly anyone else knew how to avert that possibility.

Everyone of his remaining crew sat rigid as they held their weapons. This was do or die, and they held little hope that they would even survive. Still, they were tough sons of bitches, all of em. Thus, when the pool of molten metal cooled to solid slag, everyone waited breathlessly for their invaders' next move. Would they throw a grenade first or come in firing like space cowboys?

The enemy did none of that. Instead, they just walked inside. Their casual entry and their total ease caught everyone off guard. No one even discharged their weapons at the newcomers. It was just too unbelievable.

All of them were suited up in boarding armor, making at least half of Matsas' crew useless in the fight. Only himself and a few other chosen few held Class II pulse rifles. He didn't think it was too important to purchase more since they were a liability on a ship, but seeing the heavy armor being used against him, he regretted that decision.

One other figure appeared then after the boarders. The boy walked in front of the armored figures wearing only an outlandish half-robe. There was no doubt in everyone's mind that this was Captain Kid that Chief Vinson and his crew tried to assassinate.

The boy did not look very happy to be here.

"I demand to see the captain of this vessel this instant."

Having quickly considered it was a bad idea to refuse, Matsas hesitantly rose from behind the console, his rifle ready and pointed at the boy. "What do you want from us? We have no quarrel with you. Go away!"

The twitch in the kid's eye didn't look very promising. "Is that so? Is it not a fact that eleven spacers of your employ has recently staged an assassination attempt on me? What is your response?"

It was useless to lie, and with six rifles pointed at him he had better not mess with this kid. "Vinson and ten of his lackeys deserted my ship in order to take a shot at your own. They did not attack you out of my permission. If anything else, I would have stopped my boys from taking you on if I was better informed of their plan."

The boy who vanquished over Captain Hargrave along with much of Matsas' own seasoned fighters considered the explanation for a minute or so. Life or death, all hinged upon the decision of this one singular figure. Matsas prayed hard to Lady Luck to grant him one more lucky break.

But his luck ran out. The boy captain shook his head and retrieved a heavy revolver from his side. "I'm sorry, but too much has been lost to me this day. If I was any less vigilant, I would have lost my life to your unruly men. My second in command still lies dormant in my medical bay, recovering from the wounds your boys inflicted upon us. Not all of my attackers are dead. You shelter two amongst you at this very moment. My blood calls for their blood, and I will have it, one way or another. The question is, will you surrender them to me?"

The two survivors desperately pleaded their captain with their eyes not to be handed over. While Matsas dearly wanted to protect them, it would only anger the boy further, perhaps pushing him into killing all of his crew along with himself.

Besides, the two deserters brought their fates on themselves. He nodded, both to the kid and to his still-loyal men, who moved to restrain their stricken colleagues.

"Fuck no man, I'm not gonna go out without a fight!" One of his defectors announced as he bore his rifle towards the kid. A splatter of pulse lasers raced towards the enemy, followed by the fire of his other defector. "Eat pulse you fucking demon!"

Instead of being struck, the boy along with all of his escort stood passive as all the pulses diverted to the sides. After letting this go on for a few seconds, the kid lifted his revolver and pulled the trigger twice. There was hardly any recoil.

Instantly the rifles that the two defectors held jumped from their steady grips and tore apart into scrap. All fire ceased as the defectors had nothing left to fire back at the invaders.

"S-Shit!" One of them cursed, and approached another crewman to tried to pry off the pulse rifle from the hapless man's hands. "Let go man, let go!"

Captain Kid jerked once with his head, and one of the boarders came up to aim his odd-looking heavy rifle. The man pulled the trigger, letting out the same high-powered beam that destroyed the hatch, only this time it melted both the defector and the unfortunate crewman who still held on to his rifle. The beam lasted short, only a second, but already there was nothing left of the two victims but ash and a few cut-off limbs.

Captain Matsas almost couldn't believe it. Class III beam rifles that were light enough to be used without deployment. This kid was a monster.

"My name is Harry." The kid announced as he twirled his revolver with his finger. The weapon suddenly stopped to aim the tip right at Matsas. "And my wrath has very little patience left. Either give me my pound of flesh, or I'll cut it myself from your fat slobbering belly."

The captain lost it at that moment. He wasn't sure whether it was the piercing green eyes, or the huge smoking bore of the revolver, but he just knew he wouldn't live if he let the boy do as he will in impunity. So the older captain pulled the trigger and let his pulse lasers loose at his opponent's direction, knowing they would be diverted but hoping whatever shielding the boy utilized would run out of juice. Matsas didn't get the opportunity to see if it would work, for six green beams of cutting heat tore through his uniform and flash-burned his internal organs into ashes.

The rest of his helpless crew followed him swiftly into the afterlife.

End Notes: I've been able to post a new chapter almost every day, but I'm soon reaching the 60 thousand word mark where I intend to take a break then. It's not like I have all day to write.

Star

The taking of the Spiral Spine didn't satisfy Harry's bloodlust, but it did ease him somewhat. It was just frustrating not to throttle the necks of those directly responsible.

Other people on the space station didn't appreciate his violent retaliation though. It caused quite a stir amongst its residence once the news leaked out.

Since his rash retaliation, others treated him and his crew much more cautiously. Vendors wouldn't sell to them anymore. Deliveries would be delayed or canceled entirely. Recruitment dried to a crawl as no one was crazy enough to serve under that 'totally fucked up Captain Kid'. Even the bars and brothels turned his men down. In effect, there was nothing more to be gained by lingering. Harry had gotten the hint: he was overstaying his welcome.

All the important stuff was done at least. The water tanks and food stock were fully provisioned. Fuel and air was at optimal range. Minor damages have been repaired on the spot and other minor equipment have been replaced. The new stern turret had just been installed by Felicity and her turret operators a few hours earlier so there was nothing holding the Evie back. As for the Spine, Harry didn't want to deal with a shared command just yet, so he ordered it to be stripped of anything of value and sell it to the junkyard. The proceedings were more than adequate to pay for all of his expenses he had incurred during his stay, but it was a drop compared to the three hundred million credits that he needed to pay for the Gravitic Catapult.

That was why Harry didn't want to leave towards Rindebal Station without a job or some intel on some juicy targets. He was a pirate captain now, so he had to start doing what he was suppose to be doing – piracy.

Of course, job offers and intel didn't come in by themselves. If such a thing as a bulletin board existed, practically every government would have their spies leak the information to all the security forces. No, getting into contact with people who needed something doing or had some intel to sell was a rather more relational skill. You needed contacts in every port, connections with every high-placed administrator and a lot of cash to bribe your way through them. He

heard from his crew that Claris usually took care of those things, but she was still scheduled to be in the vat for three more days.

Harry didn't know if he would last three days at the station.

Still, it turned out having a bloodthirsty reputation actually helped put him on the radar on some clients. He had just ordered Cleveland and his team to spread the word out before he received an incoming hail.

The bridge viewscreen cleared up into a video feed. What Harry had initially expected to see was some old scumbag working for some gang or the other. Instead, what he got instead was a very attractive looking young lady in a neat modern business suit. Sober blue lines warped over her tailor-cut garments that subtly accentuated her hourglass torso. The sight was so unexpected that the wizard captain was momentarily speechless.

The blond pony-tailed woman gazed at Professor Zhang, who sat on the captain's seat directing workflow with his command ring. Instead of addressing him however, the woman turned to Harry who was sitting on the lower observer seat.

"Hello. I offer greetings." She began in a cultured and accented English voice. Was it Scottish? Australian? It was hard for Harry to typify. The lady continued on despite Harry's paralysis. "I represent a group of individuals with some delicate interests who have need of some.. interventionary services. Do I have your interest, Captain Harry?"

Breaking his surprise, Harry leaned forward and tried to look not like a drooling idiot. "Sure. I mean yes, pleased to meet you. You are..?"

"You may refer to me as Star." The contact said without inflection. "In one minute, a courier will deliver a passcode protected information cube. At the end of this transmission, half of that code will be revealed to you. The other half will be transmitted at a point in space two thousand kilometers from Vlessing Base. Whether you wish to receive it or not is not my concern. Know that if you choose to complete the passcode and open the data cube, that you will be bound by both confidentiality and commitment terms. Break this contract, and you will regret it dearly."

"..Okay." Somehow, receiving a threat from an office lady was not quite intimidating. "So, 'Star', it's not that I'm not interested, but I don't want to end up going through all this trouble for just ten thousand creds, you know what I'm saying?"

Star crinkled her mouth slightly in a way that made her look even more ravishingly hot. "We are well aware of your ship's capabilities and costs. Rest assured that your compensation will be well in excess of the norm. If you desire more detail, then I would suggest plotting a course to the provided coordinates and prepare your ship for departure. Good day, sir."

The feed cut off, Harry alone with the rest of the bridge. He turned to Zhang.

"Already on it." His Third remarked as he entered a few commands on his console. "Security feeds show an armored courier vehicle approaching. I've informed Cleveland and his new men to meet our new arrival."

Having a lieutenant under you who knows what to do before you ask was quite a handy person to have. Harry nodded in acknowledgement and rose from his seat. "I'll be down at the entry hatch to get a hold of this 'data cube'. Have you already received the first half of the passcode?"

"A moment." The professor eased himself further into the seat and called up more diagrams. "Ah, here."

A small device spat out a transparent plastic sheet. Harry took it and saw nothing but dots and lines. "What the heck am I suppose to do with this?"

"It works by electromagnetic logeocryptology. Just put the sheet on a flat surface and put the cube in the middle of the sheet. The cube should acknowledge the input automatically."

"Alright, thanks. Prepare the Evie to undock as soon as possible." Harry ordered as he made his way towards the exit. "I don't know what this is all about, but it sure got my attention."

If it was a prank, they probably wouldn't have used a hot blonde. In all fairness, why show her face at all? These 'group of individuals'

were probably rich boys who did not want their names connected to any dirty dealings. They could have used much more secure means to contact him, perhaps by letter or by a voice-only transmission. Trying to show a visual, no matter how fake or enhanced the contents were, always left a few traces that could be tracked to a source. To actually deal with pirates in this fashion either spoke of nonchalance or.. something else. Did they perhaps think that his hormones would run so high that he would do everything a pretty face asked for? Sure, he loved to tap that blonde's ass, but he wasn't that dumb. Was he?

Well, he did accept a totally unreliable request by a totally unfamiliar girl to head out to an unknown region of space a fair distance away from any direct help. Heck, he might even be led into an ambush right out the doorstep of Vlessing Base. It could be that some old friends of Captain Hargrave or Captain Matsas were trying to get revenge on him. It might also even be that Star's benefactors were really wizards who were out to destroy him and his ship by magic.

...Nah. He was just being overly paranoid. All the cloak-and-dagger stuff involving hot babes only happened to James Bond. And he was no Bond.

The courier was just a nobody who didn't seem remotely interested in what he had to deliver. The package itself was small and mundane, and the cube was hardly anything impressive. Sort of like a tofu cube actually, except that it wasn't vegetarian. Harry brought both the cube and info sheet to his quarters and did as Zhang instructed. The cube seemed to glow for a moment as it interfaced with the sheet, but then died down.

"That's it?"

He took the cube and examined all six sides. Nothing except for some indecipherable circuitry. The sheet however looked slightly different. Instead of random lines, the sheet instead displayed a faint image of some sort of map. Intrigued, Harry picked it up and looked at it closer. He held it up a light to see if there were any hidden watermarks or something like that. He even cast some faint diagnostic spells over it. Nothing. Shrugging, Harry put the sheet on the surface of his work console, which automatically scanned and interpreted the data.

A communication box opened up. It was his Third. "Captain Harry. The computer informed me that additional coordinates have been added to the databanks. Do you wish to set a course along this new route?"

"Yes."

"I'll put Navigator Jennings on it right away, sir. Zhang out."

It took more than two hours to clear the ship for departure. There were many systems that needed to be brought online in a gradual manner so that they wouldn't alarm Vlessing Base authorities. The loss of a few vital hands also slowed down the proceedings. Practically every crewmember looked at him in a different light since the decimation. Harry didn't mind the dirty looks. Either his crew would suck it up or be culled. In the end, they would all obey his commands, and that was what ultimately mattered.

It was better to be feared than loved, after all.

Under the watchful gaze of the space station, the Eviscerator finally undocked. It was an extremely complicated procedure that Harry found almost impossible to follow at his observation seat. Helmsman Nicholas eased the mobile carrier out of the docking beam, making sure the thrust wouldn't burn or deform the station's apparatus. The engineers back at the engine bay in the meanwhile made sure the engine heated up from a cold start without cracking any housing or threaten to leak an electrical surge throughout the ship's delicate systems. Weapons remained firmly locked down, but were watched over by their operators just in case something happened to them. The two interceptors kept in the hangar bay were likewise hawked by the deck crew to make sure it didn't slide and smash something over if the inertial dampeners happen to fail.

To see the sleek angular form of his ship come to life and move under its own powerful potential was immensely satisfying to see. Few people if any had such power at their fingertips. With this ship, one could travel throughout the entire solar system, coast along the forgotten corners between planets and moons, and do combat with the majority of space farers. Being the captain of the ship was much like being the ruler of a nation. Your will was absolute. Your power was limitless. Every little aspect of his minions' lives was inevitably tied back to his authority. It gave Harry a thrill.

Under the capable if clumsy direction of Professor Zhang, the crew managed not to bungle the entire departure sequence and put the ship well under way towards the coordinates specified by Star. Apparently travelling from point A to point B didn't entail simply pointing the bow at the right direction and engage the thrust. The navigator interpreted the route provided by their clients and modified it to take into account a load of things unique to the ship and unique to the environment. Space wasn't as empty as everyone thought, especially around the tumultuous gravity well of Jupiter. It turned out that there were still such things as 'weather forecasts' in space, except these ones had meteor storms and space dust instead of rain and fog. Basically, the captain determined the destination, and the navigator would ensure the ship arrived without crashing against a meteorite or something whacky.

"How long till we get there?"

The old navigator turned around. "At the rendezvous? At cruising acceleration we can expect to be there in two hours."

Since that took a while, Harry decided to tour the ship. He had never really been out of his cabin since his first arrival. He didn't really know where the mess hall was located or where the regular crew had their bunks. He hadn't even seen the weapon emplacements yet, although they were really vital to the ship's performance.

The mobile carrier had one main bow turret. It mounted a single heavy barrel that fired pressurized particle lasers that could vary in intensity and frequency to produce different effect, hence the name varilaser. It was capable of firing standard pulses, to nEMP and even high-energy penetrators such as X-Ray and gamma rays. The only disadvantage of this weapon is that the containment of the bolts that were fired from the cannon wasn't very efficient and would fall apart almost instantly. This meant that the effective range was quite limited compared to other Class VII weapon mounts such as beam lasers or railcannons. Still, compared to the versatility it offered and the lack of dangerous targets a pirate typically engaged, it was perfect.

"Number three capacitors.. do we even have a few of those?"

"According to the datalogs there's a few in the tool shop."

"Go fetch them then."

A bit of grumbling followed. "Yes, ma'm."

The man turned around and almost bumped into Harry. "Sorry there, mate, but don't... walk.. around.. like.. this?"

Gabriel was gaping at the sudden sight of the captain. It wasn't often that Harry showed himself or even deigned to go into the lower bowels of the ship. He quickly smarted himself and buttoned his loose-fitting shirt. "Sir!"

Felly and Hernandez turned around to see what was going on, and put on the same look of astonishment as Harry enjoyed their confusion.

"Captain?" Felicity prompted. "What brings you down here, sir?"

"Just taking a tour of the entire ship." Harry responded as he walked over the truck-sized monstrosity that had to be the main armament of the ship. "So this it it? The Class VII varilaser cannon?"

A grand smile appeared on Felly's face as she presented the beauty. "Aye, sir. She packs quite a whallop, yes indeed she does." But then her smile dropped completely. "But the maintenance on that thing was almost worthless. These goddamn pirates – excuse me for saying so – can't handle anything above Class V. They've been cleaning and polishing the insides like it was their personal pulse rifle. It looks good on inspection, but all they've done was scrubbing off the heat-absorbing coating. We've had to recoat the insides and replace all the worn out components one by one. We've been at it for a few weeks now so it should almost be finished."

"Will this present a problem if we might be forced to fight at say, two hours from now?"

"Nah. As I've said, we've been replacing the faulty components one by one so if it turns out we need to use the mount right away, we can just insert the old stuff and close the casing. It'll only take a minute or two, tops."

"Alright, good." Harry nodded. Out of all his civilian crew, it seemed that Felicity and her two assistants have been adjusting to their new reality the best. They already came with a set of useful skills that was instantly applicable to life aboard a pirate vessel. "Is there anything else I need to know? Do you have any advice for me on how to deploy this weapon in battle?"

"Hmm well.."

"It's a big gun, but our generator's not so big." Hernandez remarked as he exited from the cockpit with a wrench in hand. "Class VII guns are really meant for military frigates and cruisers. The Evie's a great ship, but she was never meant to be more than a small policing carrier. The varilaser can't sustain a high rate of fire for long. Heat is not the problem, power is. There's just not enough juice to go around, especially if the engine thrusters are constantly engaged."

"So you can't do both, is that what you're saying?" The wizard guessed. It made sense, he supposed. Modern fusion reactors were amazing, but the energy every other system was eagerly gulping dwarfed everything that used to be possible back in his own time. Heck, even a simple light source ran on kilowatts instead of watts.

The Hispanic engineer somewhat nodded, but also added, "The turret has capacitors that can last a few dozens of shots, but after that's drained it'll slow down to a trickle before it has time to recharge. So the best way to use them is to time the fire until your targets is either close or immobile. This gun here ain't meant for long-range sniping duels. We got the interceptors for that."

Ah, the fighters. They had two of them in the hangar bay, but the ship could fit two more strike craft. That those spaces were still empty was a little worrying. Having only half the amount of fighters available was like fighting with only one arm. Getting new fighters, along with some experienced pilots, took time and effort. Vlessing Base was really too small of a port to find a lot of good recruits. Harry had heard that Rindebal Station had a very sizable job market, so they would make do with only two for now until they arrived there.

"Ah, very well then. I'll get on with my tour now. Good work."

In addition to checking out the other four smaller turrets, Harry took a quick look in the engine room before grabbing a bite at the mess

hall. Two hours quickly passed, and Harry was well on his way back to the bridge.

It was time to see what these vague directions were all about.

"It's a comm buoy." The sensor tech called out. "Anchored by hover modules fixed to that asteroid nearby. Probably keyed to our signature, otherwise it wouldn't activate and send us that signal."

Their ship was long past the buoy now since the ship had been continuously accelerating since her launch from the pirate base. Ship travel worked like that, and it took quite a bit of explaining from Zhang before he could understand the implications. Ships took forever to accelerate to a decent speed relative to their environment. It also took the same amount of acceleration to stand to a relative stop.

That meant if you had to be at point B as fast as possible, you could just keep your thrusters burning. The only problem was that when you eventually get to B, you'll shoot right onwards and end up at point C before you know it. With a zero-zero intercept course, you could start from zero velocity from point A and end up at rest speed at point B by accelerating only halfway before turning around the ship and accelerating in the opposite direction. It was a heck of a lot slower though, but that was physics.

Since they travelled at full burn, the ship essentially just coasted along without direction. With no other destination in mind, Jennings had simply inputted a direction that would take the ship towards the clearest cluster while cutting off all burn to save thruster fuel.

"Well, let's see what this mission is all about. Zhang?"

"On it." The professor said as he ordered the printer to spit out another plastic-like sheet. Harry then performed the procedure action over again, only this time at the bridge. The cube scanned the sheet and made a satisfying click. The lines on the thing suddenly glowed green. A small opening appeared at the top, revealing a small lens. It projected a small, holographic recording.

Star was the one to greet them again. "If you are viewing this recording, then that indicates that you have decided to accept this

mission. Do note that this means that the tasks that is set before you must be completed. Failure to do so will merit severe sanctions. You have been warned."

Her image vanished to make way of a local space chart. Jupiter was at the very centre, but several clouds of asteroid fields and scores of moons dotted around the gravity well. It made for an extremely crowded and dense image of the local space. One small icon blinked inside the large and mostly empty asteroid cloud designated as the Jupiter Outback.

"Vlessing Base is currently situated at the eastern half of the Jupiter Outback. The target is conveniently located at the edge of the Outback in the direction of the main interplanetary space lanes."

Another icon blinked, this one in red.

"This is a small colony development convoy. It is chartered by the Trindle-5 Asteroid Colony to deliver certain heavy-duty mining and defensive installation components. Amongst its cargo is a Class X thermal beam laser mount and its accompanying hyperfusion power generator. Both these components must not be allowed to fall into Trindle-5's hands."

A dotted line extended from the red icon and went further in the Jupiter Outback, until it came across a circle that was tagged as Trindle-5.

"The mission is as follows: destroy the Class X weapon and the hyperfusion generator while they are still en route. We specifically state destroy, not steal, so do not think of selling the components afterwards or they might end up back at Trindle-5. In any case, do not allow the convoy to reach Trindle-5 before you begin the assault, for the colony's perimeter is too well guarded with its anti-frigate railcannon emplacements."

"The convoy itself is formidable. Its core is composed of five medium cargo haulers that are certainly armed with basic anti-fighter screens. Its escort includes a mercenary contingent of ten fighters along with one cargo hauler converted to a mothership. This numerical advantage makes an assault on this convoy with corvettes extremely unpalatable. However, a single mobile carrier has an acceptable success rate."

A diagram appeared showing the details of all the ships, including the mishmash of mercenary fighters.

"In any case, do not forget your mission. Your objective is to destroy the two components, not to destroy all enemy combatants. With regards to compensation, an account has been prepared at both Vlessing base and Rindebal Station totaling the sum of twenty million universal credits. Your arrival at either station will prompt a handover of this account at confirmation of the destruction of the target objectives. In addition, if you somehow manage to overwhelm their defenses, then you can consider any other prize that you have seized as your bonus. That is all. Star out."

Everyone on the bridge was silent for a moment. Harry wondered about the details. Twenty million creds sounded like a lot.. but the risks were high as well. Pirates didn't usually go after armed targets – why bother when you can just raid some unarmed transport that's completely alone? But pickings were meager and slim, and it would take forever to reach the three hundred million credit mark. Jobs like these are what he really needed to earn creds fast. He would just have to rely on his crew and his powers to make this work without incurring a severe amount of damage.

"Zhang, invite everyone who you think is important enough to the briefing room in one hour. We'll need to plan our attack on this convoy."

The boy then left the professor to his duty. Spellbooks needed to be consulted, and a little divining couldn't hurt. Even if Harry still blamed the whole discipline for ruining his life.

The briefing room was nothing but a small cramped space containing a round table and a dozen plush seats. A few presentation tools were available, along with a high-resolution holoprojector to view the latest action flicks without any stuttering. There wasn't really anything special about the space until you consider the sheer sophistication of privacy monitors. Nothing of any value leaked from the room, neither sound nor heat nor radiation. Not even gravity could be measured inside, to prevent from any snoopers from finding out how many people were inside.

Just to be sure, Harry added some privacy charms in order to bolster the room's protections against scrying and other magical eavesdropping.

His Third had invited a very small group of people, which made the discussion manageable. Along with himself, he invited Chief of Security Cleveland, Navigator Jennings, Weapons Officer Stacy and Defense Officer Blake. It would have been extremely helpful if Claris was present, but Harry didn't want to risk her recovery by bringing her out prematurely. Selner had indicated that the executive officer would be up and running well before the ship would reach the convoy, which was a small consolation.

There used to be a tactical officer aboard the ship, but he was unfortunately executed during the decimation. Harry just hmphed at the news. At least it proved that no one was out of reach, not even the most useful and talented crew members. Claris would be able to take over the deceased tactical officer's duties once she recovered. Harry was quite decent in strategy and tactics as well, though in magical duels, not space battles. Some principles still stayed common in any conflict though.

"Thank you for being here." Harry began the meeting. "I assume everyone of you is up to date with the mission and had enough time to study the details that were passed along the transmission. So where do we start?"

The navigator spoke up first. "Since we are the aggressors, we have the luxury of choosing the time and place of the confrontation."

The man pressed something on his tab, causing the projector in the middle of the table to display a portion of the Jupiter Outback. Both the convoy and their end destination were highlighted with icons. Along with that was other information; projected velocity, projected route, obstacles, potential anomalies, etc.

"As you all might be aware of, navigating through the Jupiter Outback poses a serious challenge. There are many individual asteroid fields that comprise of this one huge area around Jupiter's orbit, some deemed impassable. Other space debris originating from deep space constantly get trapped by Jupiter's gravity well, causing frequent collisions and shifts in orbit. All this has forced the convoy

to project a route through this relatively calm corridor between the edge of the Outback and the Main Eastern Cluster."

The view zoomed in further, focusing on the hundreds of thousands of kilometers that this 'small' corridor represented. "Due to high interference, scanning range is limited and cannot cover the entirety of the corridor at its widest portions. At the three narrowest junctions our scans would have a much higher probability to detect the ships, but these are typically positions when the mercenary escort is the most at guard."

So they could either ambush the convoy at one of the three most obvious positions, or try to catch them off-guard in the open.

"Won't we be able to use our fighters to extend our scan range?" The professor asked. Smart. Harry hadn't thought of that.

Shaking his head, Jennings projected another image. The Eviscerator along with her two interceptors were displayed in one of the open bulges. Thin blue circles portrayed their scan range. "Already thought of that. As you can see, their scan range is simply too limited. Our interceptors are defensive craft meant to fight in close support to their mothership. Not much space has been dedicated to their sensory equipment due to their reliance on their mothership's superior electronics. If we had scout craft in our bay, we would have been able to make up for this deficiency."

Perhaps that was something Harry needed to rectify as soon as they arrived at Rindebal. But this came first.

"What is your advice then, Jennings?"

The man pointed at the middle bottleneck. "At this position, we will have adequate time to prepare our ambush and cool our heat signature. Not as much as the one at the very end, but if some ship manages to pass our envelope, her vectors will be constrained by the asteroids making any other direction except forward impassible. Thus, even if two different ships should escape, we can hunt them both down at the same time since they cannot effectively split up."

It was a sound argument, and no one objected to it, so Harry approved of the decision.

"Now that we know our battleground, what's next?"

The rest was pretty straightforward. They would find a rock that was floating somewhere in the middle and try to minimize their emissions as much as possible. If done properly, their heat profile would be indistinguishable from their target's long range sensors. Only a direct visual would reveal themselves, but if they kept to the other side of the asteroid, they wouldn't be able to see the ship until it was too late.

There were some complications of course. The bottleneck was quite wide and left a lot of maneuvering space. If the convoy happened to skirt the edges when they passed through, it would leave the Evie significantly out of weapons range. Starting the ship from a cold start and burning down the distance would give plenty of warning to the convoy. It wasn't too common though since the chance of collision was high, but it was a possibility that had to be taken into account.

Another issue was how to best deploy their two interceptors. The heavy fighters were formidable duelists, but they were badly outnumbered if they were thrown against ten fighters of variable configurations. Stacy advocated hiding them on the surface of an asteroid like the Evie, while Burke wanted to keep them inside the hangar bay as protection and as a reserve. While launching them from the ship was risky since it would entail retracting a critical portion of their armor, the interceptors would be able to respond to any threats to the Eviscerator instantly. Harry eventually chose to keep the strike craft in the hangar bay. Keeping the interceptors out in space risked them being spotted and shot to shreds before they could even activate.

The meeting wrapped up after taking care of some more minor details. Everyone left to brief their subordinates and fellow pirates of the details concerning their upcoming smash job. While everyone was preparing for their jobs with drills or maintenance, Harry prepared for the coming raid in his own way: with magic.

End Notes:

The Impossible Ruse

The colonies of the Jupiter Outback represented the current frontiers of human exploration. Most were small communities numbering from a hundred to a hundred thousand colonists who engaged primarily in mining valuable extra-solar ores. Jupiter was the vacuum cleaner of the solar system, sucking most errant asteroids and meteorites into its immense gravity well before they pass on and end up crashing against the fragile surface of Earth. Most of these rocks were useless chunks of ice, or contained common metals such as iron. However, once in a while they possessed an exceedingly rare mineral. Versetite, Elernite and Jeiseon were just a handful of many types of ores discovered in recent centuries that contained unusual properties far superior to what is regularly found on planets and moons. They were also very rare.

That made these asteroids have value. There were billions or even trillions of credits buried underneath their surface. Any entrepreneur could make a fortune out of exploiting even one small asteroid.

The problem was finding these rocks in the first place. That was what prospectors were for. Usually a retired miner or a family business, these adventure-hungry individuals would take their small dingy ships and scour the immense and still hugely unexplored asteroid belts around Jupiter's orbit. Some never find anything of value. Others make a string of discoveries. Minerals that no one has ever encountered yet were usually the hardest to find, simply because scanners had the tendency to dismiss their signals as plain rock. Only by having a trained geologist in your crew could you determine the value of such a strange new mineral.

Once prospectors found a large enough asteroid that could be mined out, they personally delivered the details to an Exploration Society branch by hand. This interplanetary organization was one of the few, truly neutral outfit that was recognized and ratified by every planetary and lunar government (except for Mercury). In exchange for a hefty cut, the Society handled the cataloging and sale of the claims on behalf of the prospectors. Those organizations that were interested in exploiting the claim would purchase bid on them, and if won, begin to construct a colony on the rock.

Colony construction in the Outback was exceedingly risky. The region defined lawlessness. The immense region of asteroid belt

and other space dust was situated far away from any Jovian moon. Apart from a few isolated stations, the area was the space equivalent of the Wild West. Great riches were to be found in the rocks if you knew where to look for them, but it was easier just to take the valuable goods from the miners after they had done all the hard work of mining the ores. This made perimeter defense a top priority for such developing settlements.

"Goldmine, anything on sensors?"

"Negative, Orion."

"Keep your eyes peeled. The next tunnel is coming up soon. Keep sharp and stick to the plan. Velvet will be launching out of the Pouch in ten minutes."

"Copy that."

While the Trindle-5 colony was well equipped to repel the occasional pirate, it could not sustain a heavy assault by a corporate raiding fleet. That made this delivery of vital components important. With just a single Class X beam laser, the colony would be able to slice apart any cruiser that dared to make a threatening move. Only battleships would be able to safely absorb the beam laser's punishment, but no sane government was going to waste such precious resources on a single mining colony. The entire future of the colony hinged on this convoy's delivery.

The colony therefore hired a formidable group of mercenaries to protect their shipment. The Orion Constellations was an established group of veteran fighter pilots who specialized in escort duty and anti-piracy sweeps. Their teamwork was renowned, using it to great effect on ganging up on corvettes. When they heard there was an escort job available that paid out at a million creds, they immediately snapped it up, confident that they could accomplish this high-risk task with their state-of-the-art strike craft.

The mission was going well. No threats have surfaced so far. No suspicious ships have been shadowing them either. Goldmine and Velvet both patrolled the perimeter of the convoy in shifts, making sure that no surprise would befall upon them. Still, it didn't hurt to be too suspicious. Orion had learned that lesson the hard way in his career.

The comm crackled again. "Goldmine here, there's some space dust up ahead, along with a few rocks, averaging ten centimeters in diameter."

That wasn't too uncommon in these tight enclosures. Rocks regularly crashed against other rocks, producing sand dust and other tiny chunks that went in all directions. Still, Orion felt the familiar tingles creeping up on him.

"Any electronics or mines?"

"None sir. No metals."

"Roger that, continue patrol. I'll send out Velvet to scan the rocks in more detail."

Along with the other scout, Orion scrambled the rest of his contingent of fighters from his mothership and spread them out in a wide formation to cover the convoy and be ready to react in a moment's time. If he was a pirate, he would most likely attack the convoy at this position along their route. The 'cave' of asteroids around them kept shrinking further and further as they went on, and they would arrive at the narrowest chokepoint in a few minutes more. After that their maneuvering space would expand again, reducing the chance of pirate ambushes. That meant that it was now or never for the pirates. Still, from the looks of it, Goldmine's sensors failed to detect any threats. Usually that meant that they weren't there.

Just to be sure however, Orion prepared his 'surprise' to deploy if something serious would start to happen. You could never be too prepared.

The ambush is a battle tactic that has long been the staple of humanity's violent conflicts. It is the art of making possible the impossible, of achieving total annihilation with just the fraction of the cost. With adequate mental and physical preparation, a small and outnumbered force could overwhelm five times their number simply by having the initiative and make the first strike. No matter how experienced the defenders are, they cannot possibly maintain their concentration for hours on end. Such unprepared soldiers could be smashed into paralysis if the initial phase of the ambush hits them hard. This advantage can be further extended if the attackers were

intimately familiar with the environment and the enemy. What may originally seem like miracles were nothing but the results of a well-prepared and well-timed gamble.

And that was exactly what Harry was doing. A single mobile carrier with only two interceptors could not defeat a squadron of well-diversified strike craft in an outright slugging match. In truth, such a matchup was very asymmetrical. A single throw of the dice determined whether one side or another would luck out in favor against their opponents. All the planning and all the positioning that preceded this final, critical moment was therefore of utmost importance. Would their ruse work? Or would their opponents see Harry's plan through before they could spring their trap?

The first scout passed by their harmless looking rock, oblivious to their presence. A second scout fighter made a more leisurely sweep, using ground scanners to map the surfaces of nearby rocks and passing them on to its mothership for further analysis. Even if its scans passed directly over the Eviscerator, it was useless, as the entire ship was embedded underneath a pile of space debris.

Inside the bridge and much of the other parts of the Eviscerator, everything was dark and silent. The reactor ran at its lowest setting, and was shielded from radiating its highly unique signature through the ritual ward drawn around energy generator. More minor wards dotted other parts and sections of the ship, minimizing emissions while adding other minor enhancements such as strengthening and cooling charms. While this kind of modification would have never been possible in Harry's own time, in this time period technology had moved beyond electrically sensitive materials and designs that made them so vulnerable to EMP. This inherent resistance to all but the most potent electrical charges made it possible to cast certain low-powered enchantments over them that would not obstruct their functioning.

"It won't be long now..."

Everyone sat or stood silent at their posts. They waited in the dark and even in the cold as environmentals had cut off heating a hours ago. No one on the ship even knew what was exactly going on since most internal networks were put offline. Even the shipboard sensors were put offline, blinding the entire ship from the outside world. The only way they were even able to observe their surrounding space

was through the carefully placed probes spread out amongst the other rocks. These tiny and almost undetectable gadgets communicated their passively collected data to the Eviscerator by laser link.

Clariss, having finally recovered from the shotgun blast, sat poised for battle on the captain's chair. One of her hands rose in the small light shining down on her position, holding out four fingers. It was silent signal to the bridge crew that informed them that the ambush would go ahead as continued, and that they should prepare for imminent combat. As more data was revealed on the other fighters and transports nearing their position, Clariss kept directing the bridge crew to tweak certain settings or adjust a few details in the battle plan. One notable adjustment was the order to cycle the main gun's varilaser setting to nEMP bolts. That meant that the executive officer was confident that they could capture all the transports instead of destroying them and their valuable cargo.

The main body of the convoy neared. Already several fighters hovered within relatively close proximity. If there was any good moment to strike, the Second thought it was now.

Her head turned to Harry's, who for once had forgone his usual battle robes for modern vacuum-sealed boarding armor. His helmeted visor turned to the woman and nodded his assent.

She slammed her fist against a control, activating the lights and initiated a warm-up of the reactor and the rest of the ship. The time to strike was now. "Initiate detonation!"

Professor Zhang acknowledged the command. "Initiating detonation. All crew brace yourselves!"

The side of the asteroid facing the approaching convoy went up in explosion. The carefully placed shaped charges broke up the rock around the buried Eviscerator and flung the debris outwards, surprising anyone close at hand at even the possibility of such an action.

It was easy landing the ship on a flat enough crater. The sticking charms around the outer hull of the ship along with a few leviosa's redirected free floating particles to the surface of the carrier without resorting to highly visible gravitic modules. The chunks, now freed

from magical forces of attraction, propelled forward with great force that would dent any star fighter close by, although most of them were many kilometers away to be at any risk. They provided enough interference to confuse the enemies' scans and obscure their strength for the critical opening minute.

"Point defense, hold fire." Claris ordered as she took in the rapidly developing situation. "Main gun, track the enemy mothership. Fire when in ninety-nine percent range."

"Fighter wing approaching! One bomber escorted by two mediums! Detecting high explosive payload!"

"Engage all facing turrets towards that bomber! Do not allow it to align itself in a bombing run! Ignore the fighters if you have to!"

Defense officer Blake spoke up over the din. "Missile locks detected! A volley of nine Class V anti-corvette warheads incoming at long range bearing 134-055. Shall I deploy countermeasures?"

"No." The Second ordered curtly. "The debris will take a couple of them out, and whatever point defense that can't take out the bomber will handle the rest. Save the countermeasures for later."

"Aye aye." Blake then turned to his console and opened a channel to all four secondary turret mounts. "Power the pulse lasers down to Class VI, rapid cycling, and intercept the missiles when they near effective range. The bomber still has priority, so take that out first."

The updating plot revealed that the transports were effectively panicking. Instead of travelling onwards through the enclosure, they instead spread in all directions. Two of them even turned around and tried to head back the way they came from. That wouldn't do.

"Load a blanket torpedo! Disable guiding, and set it to timed detonation. Configure it to five minutes and be ready to launch the torpedo at this heading at my command!" The woman then turned to Jennings. "Engage liftoff."

The old man nodded and passed it along to Helmsman Nicholas. "Activate bottom thrusters, full vertical takeoff. Change heading to 090-090 at two hundred kilometers altitude and initiate main thrusters."

The Eviscerator was finally beginning to move. Her ponderous mass parted from the larger asteroid, and she quickly launched herself upwards in the direction of the convoy. With more space, the turrets were finally clear to engage both the incoming bomber and the mass of anti-ship missiles. They came from almost opposite directions, and would be due to strike at roughly the same instant. It was a marvelous plan that was designed to force the target to split its attention.

Too bad the Evie wasn't a mere corvette with a pair of Class V and Class VI turrets.

"Stacy, forget about the mothership! Bring the main gun to bear on the incoming bomber and overwhelm it with high-volume suppressive fire!"

"Aye, Claris!" She passed the instructions on to Felicity who was commanding the main turret at the bow section of the ship.

It would take too long to change the setting back to pulsed particle laser bolts, so Felicity simply let it remain on nEMP, only powering it down a single Class for a higher fire rate. When the slow turret finally bore in the bomber's direction, the single barrel spat out rapid bolts of highly potent electrical energy. The bomber, expecting a typical corvette, was unprepared to face a rain of heavy fire. The craft was still a fair distance away from the target, so the heavy cannon couldn't hit the agile small craft as it dodged. However, it was enough to force the bomber to veer off its bombing run along with its two bewildered escorts.

In their retreat, one managed to be clipped by a bolt, frying over half of its starboard wing systems. The fighter sputtered and fell into a spin as half its thrust was cut off. Its highly predictable course made it a prime target for Gabriel's targeting computers. He eagerly pressed the fire control, seeing blue death engulf the entire fighter, frying the rest of its systems and forcing it out of the fight.

"A single fighter from Alpha Wing is completely disabled! Bomber has been successfully repelled and is circling around for another bomber run. Another bomber wing is approaching from heading 179-043. The main turret is unable to bear on Beta Wing!"

"Main gun, keep focusing on Alpha Wing!" Claris then opened a comm channel to the hangar bay. "Scramble both interceptors and engage Beta Wing. Destroy the bomber but return to the Eviscerator's security envelope afterwards. I don't want you two going into a dogfight with the escorts, it's too risky."

"Two surviving anti-corvette missiles closing in on the aft starboard section! Reactive armor is primed! Brace for impact!"

Small shaped charges slipped underneath the topmost armored layer at the targeted section tracked the incoming two missiles. When the projectiles were close enough to be affected, the charges exploded, flinging armor shrapnel, heat and pressure with remarkable accuracy in the direction of the threats. The sudden wave of incoming debris prematurely forced the missiles to set off prematurely, flinging molten pieces of superheated plasma and metal alloys meant to pierce armor, followed by a delayed explosive warhead. The armor piercing matter went on unobstructed and scorched the armor hull deeply, almost penetrating its inner barrier but failing to go through. The explosive charges, shielded by the preceding matter, went on to impact the weakened hull and exploded great chunks of hull armor and other sensitive components, disabling parts of the vast energy grid that distributed power and data to the entire ship.

On the bridge, everyone held on as a vibration akin to a heavy earthquake rolled over them, overwhelming the inertial dampeners momentarily. The crew swiftly recovered though.

"Damage assessment!"

"Aft starboard in yellow condition. Two hallways are open to vacuum. All six layers of armor are pierced in that section, but the damage is localized to a narrow area. No casualties."

Sweat rolled off Claris' brow as the engagement progressed. "Find out which craft fired those missiles and bring it up to priority. Stacy, is the torpedo ready to be launched yet?"

"The missile impacts delayed the launch, but the launcher crew will fire it as soon as they recover!"

"Good. Load the boarding capsule immediately after launch." She turned to the suited form of Harry. "Will you be going ahead with this plan of yours? The mercenaries are doing better than I thought. It could be dangerous."

"Doesn't matter." Harry stated as he unbuckled the straps of his observer seat. "There's nothing I can do here. Just keep those fighters off my back."

His Second nodded, but had to turn back to her plots as she focused all her concentration back in the unfolding battle. Hargrave was a talent in this. He made it seem so easy, but in fact every decision you made had an effect on whether your crew would survive or not. It was hard bearing this responsibility on yourself. Just a single slipup or a momentary lack of attention might be all that's enough to doom a crewman. When Claris remarked to Harry that the mercenary escort was good, she also implied that she might not be good enough to win.

That didn't mean she would give up.

"Intensify the pulse barrage on my mark! Let's give our captain some cover!"

There is a truth and a lie. The lie is that everyone fights to the death. The truth is that everyone fights harder when it's to the death. The key is to present the illusion of urgency on your own side, while giving the enemy the choice to run when pressured. That is usually hard to achieve deliberately, since your opponents are bound either by honor, by retaliation from their superiors, or simply by intense kinship with their fellow brothers in arms. To go against these ingrained human instincts and achieve some sort of advantage, one needed to exploit them as a violinist would manipulate his strings.

That was what Harry's mission was all about. According to the net, the mercenaries that they were facing were a tight bunch that shared many hardships together. Such a close team was intimately familiar each other's strengths and weaknesses, and could benefit from the valuable experience of teamwork. Their resilience against a mobile carrier spoke volumes of their capabilities, and their ability to penetrate the Evie's armor was frightening. Mere strengthening and cooling charms wouldn't cut it in this engagement. Harry needed to intervene more directly.

The only problem was getting close enough to do that in the first place. With no intimate knowledge of the fighters and their pilots, nor access to someone who knew of them, he could not target them with an Avada Kedavra across the hundreds of kilometers that the battlespace engulfed. So he needed to get close. Real close. Close enough to strike at the heart of the mercenary force.

The heart in this case was, of course, their mothership.

If Harry had his Firebolt with him he would just ride it all the way to the converted trade ship. Sadly, that was one of the many things he had left behind on Earth. Apparating inside the unknown enemy vessel was likewise an ill-fated choice, particularly since it used up a lot of magical energy that Harry was sure to regret. Therefore, he needed to use the boarding capsule.

After leaving the bridge, the wizard raced all the way to the lower part of the ship and headed straight to the front to enter the waiting capsule. The few crewmembers who operated the launcher then sealed the capsule and loaded it into the launch chamber. Everything had to be done quickly so there was no time to check all if all the restraints and all the safeties were in place.

"The launcher will propel the capsule at 50 g's." A tech explained on the other side as she worked to prepare the launcher for firing. "The inertial dampeners won't be able to bleed off all of it, so you'll feel pretty squashed for a few moments. After that you're in control. Try to be sparing with the fuel, as there isn't a lot of it and burns out quickly!"

Nodding his understanding, Harry gestured his readiness. He didn't want to stay cooped up inside for long. He had a job to do.

"Heading is set. Course is set. Launcher is set. All systems green. Awaiting authorization from the bridge... authorization received. Launch in three, two, one.. LAUNCH!"

The tech wasn't kidding that some g's might be felt inside. In that singular moment, the launch tube exerted an enormous electromagnetic force on the hollowed out torpedo, propelling it with the force of a sledgehammer, but a thousand times worse. His entire weight increased by six times, pressing him down hard against the

cushions of his seat. The boarding armor that he was wearing was comfortably padded on the inside, but it was all but useless in softening up the immense pressure his muscles were enduring.

"Gah!"

Fortunately, it only lasted for a fraction of the second. As soon as the capsule was out of the launcher, it travelled in a ballistic course without any additional acceleration. Local gravity reasserted itself, planting Harry's body back normally against his seat.

The control panels bloomed before him. There were a lot of gauges along with other pieces of vital data that would make sense to someone actually trained in this shit. Luckily, Harry could just activate the autopilot and let it follow some simple preprogrammed commands. For now he would coast along in a ballistic course like Claris had suggested. An inert torpedo attracted a lot less attention during a busy battle than one that was at full burn towards an important target.

Still, boarding capsules could not always expect to slip close undetected. One scout craft happened to get the ping on him, exposing the threat it represented to the convoy. According to the sensor plot, it moved away from the engagement and started to gain in on Harry's transport.

Boarding capsules had one advantage over regular strike craft. Unlike the latter, capsules were built for only one singular goal: bring boarders over to the enemy as safely and as quickly as possible. Their simple design and limited scope meant that their main engines were far superior to those of a typical fighter. Though not as agile, their higher acceleration along with specialized inertial dampeners meant that they could outrun pretty much any small craft.

Of course, that point was moot if the fighter fired missiles that accelerated even faster than the capsule, which was exactly what the scout did. Two anti-fighter streakers closed in steadily but surely towards the boarding torpedo. At this rate, it would hit Harry's transport when it was only two thirds to its destination. Getting blasted all over space was not how the boy wanted his life to end.

But even this possibility had been taken into account. As a wizard, Harry had certain advantages over his muggle counterparts that

gave him an edge. This was one of the moments to utilize one of those advantages.

He cut off the thrusters, left the pilot's seat and headed towards one of the hatches of the torpedo. Now that the capsule was on a ballistic course again, he wouldn't be blown away when he exited the interior. Using his magnetized to steady himself, Harry tried to picture the gaggle of transports that were trying to flee the encroaching battle, but failed. The sun was quite a distance away, and in the dark of space, it was hard to spot anything by eyesight unless it was really big or really close. Neither was the case here.

Still, Harry had a handy projection in the corner of his visor that showed him all he needed to know. He oriented himself in the direction of the mothership and configured his visor to create an axis towards the ship so he would always know where it was. Then, after taking a deep breath, he kicked himself off the capsule, letting himself float in space towards his target.

The boarding capsule activated its next preprogrammed instructions, aiming its nose towards one of the closer transports. This separated Harry's freefloating course from the missile-attracting capsule. In the enemy's perspective, it would look like the boarders inside the torpedo had decided to pursue a closer target in order to avoid getting hit by the incoming missiles. Sadly for the non-existent occupants, the missiles still gained quickly and managed to strike the capsule in the back, destroying it and anyone who would usually be huddled inside.

Not Harry though. His tiny signature was moving steadily towards the mothership with nothing but his own vacuum-sealed suit. While even this was a known tactic and one the enemy would guard against with their sensors, the wizard was confident he would not be detected.

Out of a sealed pocket on his armor, Harry retrieved one of his most precious magical possessions: his invisibility cloak. He wrapped the cloth around his bulky armor as best he could, and prayed that his exposed feet would not be noticeable enough to be detected by any of the fighters behind him. According to his sensors, the scout who blew up the boarding capsule only hung around for a minute before heading back to the main battle to support its comrades.

It looked like the ruse had worked.

"The thing's a fortress! No matter what we throw at the bath tub, it isn't budging an inch!"

"Stay calm, Fogview. We still have most of our strength left and some of the bogey's armor is pierced."

Arianne Spencer interpreted the continually updated scans of the enemy pirates in the middle of the command and control room of the Starlight Constellation. It was her job to evaluate the situation so the pilots wouldn't have to, and call for the most appropriate tactics when needed. It worked alright for the Orion Constellations for five years, and she wasn't about to let that legacy end. This new enemy might be tougher than anything they had faced before, but that didn't mean that they had never planned for the eventuality.

"Let's go with plan Dam Buster. Orion Flight, keep their interceptors occupied. Triangle Flight, you're the busters. Circle up to build up as much velocity as you need, but don't stray beyond five hundred kilometers. Goldmine Flight, try to make a nuisance of yourselves and distract the carrier's point defense. Release the rest of your missiles when Triangle Flight is initiating their end run. Over."

"Acknowledged, Starlight Command. Dam Buster is a-gogo! Let's crack that egg!"

In truth, the battle wasn't going so well so far. None of the carrier's systems have been affected by all the potshots the pilots have taken. All four point defense turrets along with their main gun mount were still firing away at the circling fighters with all the patience in the world. As they were energy-based weapons, they would never run out of juice unless the reactor is knocked offline. In contrast, the Orion Constellations fighters' main effective armament against an armored target such as the mobile carrier was their missiles, half of which had already been expended. They would run out entirely soon once Dam Buster has run its course, forcing her fighters to retreat from the carrier and dock with the Starlight to refuel and rearm.

It would give the mobile carrier a few moments of unopposed operation time that it could use to threaten the cargo haulers. Spencer felt little pity for that though. They hysterical tubs were

pretty much sitting ducks anyway. Their client should have hired more mercenaries.

Still. To think that a mobile carrier would actually ambush them, the Orion Constellations, and actually succeed in them back! Spencer's mercenary honor was at stake. If she could not devise a means to disable or at least scare off the pirate threat, her mercenary group's entire reputation would go down the toilet.

The three fliers of Orion Flight were doing well against the interceptors, despite the latter's superior performance in tight close-range engagements. One of the enemy's strike craft was clearly piloted by a rookie, but the other pilot was constantly watching over his wing mate like a hawk, providing little effective openings. Orion's two only bombers were consolidated into Triangle Flight, and were building up an incrementally higher velocity as they continued to accelerate in a circular course around the very limits of the carrier's point defense turrets. Goldmine Flight, which was composed of nothing more than the two surviving scouts, were darting in and out, doing their best to take potshots at turrets and failing to achieve any meaningful damage. That was okay though, since Triangle Flight was almost ready to initiate their terminal approach.

"Beginning final approach."

"Be alert, Triangle Flight. It looks like Bogey One is in on the threat. Its main gun is bearing on your heading."

"Fuck! Bogey Two and Three have broken off from us and are moving to support Bogey One. What are your orders, Starlight Command?"

"Make a run on the main turret. Force them to split their attention again. We can't allow Triangle Flight to be diverted again."

"SHIT! My half my wing's melted off! I'm losing formation... can't bring my heading under control!"

Spencer cursed. That's the third fighter taken out of action. "Engage emergency stabilization controls and get your bird back to the Starlight. If you can't manage that, just eject. I don't want to see you blasted apart like Chick Magnet."

The fight was indeed not going in the way she had expected. Thus, when the pommel of a pistol bashed against the back of her skull, she absently reflected that maybe they should have refused the attractive high-paying job.

End Notes: I've passed the 60k word mark, yay! Gonna take a break from now on. Don't expect an update tomorrow, or next week for that matter. Or even next year (kidding).

Master of Orion

Sometimes, fighter craft didn't make any sense. They were small and fragile. Besides carrying a limited amount of missiles that might punch through a hull, they generally just bit like mosquitoes. Their design practicalities meant that many compromises had to be made, resulting in a sum that was less than its component parts. In addition, the fighters were manpower hungry, with the highest personnel to tonnage ratio than any other space capable craft. Fighters and bombers might have filled a niche back in ancient history due to the flimsiness of ship and tank armor, but from the Golden Age of Colonialism onwards, every decent starship was a floating castle. It was all of this that most space theorists had rejected the concept of fighters, due to the simple fact that a large enough beam laser could vaporize them instantly without any apparent effort.

That was, until the first Terran-Martian conflict proved the stuffy academics wrong.

As the perennial underdogs, the Martians didn't have much in the way of sophisticated industry and infrastructure. Earth's then superior orbital foundries were capable of producing a huge amount of capital ships and fleet escorts as long as they had the resources and the credits. Mars in comparison had to rely on the production facilities of neutral colonies to bolster their own forces through the black market, often at great cost and delay. The longer the war went on, the worse this production discrepancy had an effect on the balance of forces. Mars' highest generals all agreed that something drastic was needed to put the scales back in their favor.

Enter the strike craft. They may be small and fragile, but they were dirt cheap and required much less infrastructure to begin production. Small, localized outfits could churn them off the assembly lines like pastries. Crewing them was also relatively simple – only a single pilot was needed instead of a fully trained and fully specialized crew. Mastering the craft was hard, but learning just the bare essentials was easy enough for most uneducated Martians that a few weeks in a simulator would do. There were already many thousands of 'experienced pilots'. Once they fought for high scores and virtual achievements (perform 3000 double loops with an X-Wing while being targeted by a Death Star). Now they fought for their freedom. Thus, armed with a vast amount of small craft and a legion of enthusiastic pilots, Mars used the surprisingly effective bombers to

devastating effect against the overconfident Terrans hanging over their world.

While beam turrets were indeed the ultimate weapons against the strike craft, they suffered from several limitations that are still not entirely remedied to this day. The first and foremost disadvantage was that they generated an enormous amount of heat. This meant that the weapon mounts could not sustain the beam for long. With hardly any means but infrared radiation to produce a net decrease of heat on the entire ship, the cycling time was massive.

The second limitation was that the size of the turret mattered a lot. A Class V point defense mount could swivel and turn their turret faster than a sluggish Class IX cruiser mount. However, even the fastest turrets would have difficulty tracking the strike craft if they were at very close range. The rigid turrets couldn't keep up with the pace anymore. It was through exploiting these weaknesses that whole battle groups worth several billion credits were completely wiped out by a force that was worth only a fraction of that amount. And by gamers and rookies to boot. Even in the waning years of the conflict, as the Terrans tried to adjust by mounting more agile classes of turrets, the Martians had made their point. Their independence followed soon after.

Fighter craft, when used correctly, could vanquish over much more formidable opponents. Sadly for the mercenaries, the Eviscerator was a bit more formidable than their usual fare. For one, the mobile carrier was meant to engage smaller targets with its four high-powered and super-cooled point defense turrets. Her armor was significantly thicker than a corvette, denying the fighters from penetrating her skin with their measly pulse lasers. The best the small craft could hope for was to knock out a few vital subsystems such as the turrets. Otherwise, they had to rely on missiles to punch through. And missiles were steadily becoming more scarce for the Orion Constellations.

"Beta Wing is changing course – they're now on a bombing approach towards our starboard!" Defense officer Blake announced frantically as he tried to interpret the data. "Their relative speed towards our ship is well in excess of two thousand kilometers an hour! They'll be on us in fifteen seconds! Our turrets can't track them! More missiles are also inbound from the opposite direction!"

Clariss cursed. With the circling craft approaching the Evie at lightning speed, there was no way their pulse turrets could track the two bombers. The bombs these two craft would release would have the same momentum, which would cause potentially catastrophic damage if even one of these kinetic projectiles hit the ship. Sometimes she wished the Evie was a proper frigate with a rack full of counter-missiles.

"Bear the ship on the bombers now!" The second-in-command ordered firmly. The bow armor was stronger, and presented a much smaller target profile than their broadsides. "Divert all power from the engines and stern turrets to the main gun now!"

As soon as the Eviscerator faced the rapidly approaching bombers, her thrust along with two of her turrets were cut in favor of pumping power to her forward guns. The two forward facing pulse mounts were firing prodigious amount of particle pulses, most to little effect due to the constant veering of the bombers. The Evie's main gun joined in the chorus of its smaller cousins, firing its own pulses at the high-priority targets.

Fate granted the pirates luck, for one of the large pulses scraped one of the bombers, overloading its protective screen and tearing through the cockpit. The main gun obliterated the rest of the lifeless husk in order to make sure it wouldn't collide against the Evie.

This left the other bomber free to approach almost unopposed except for the smaller turrets, but they were already out of time. The surviving bomber released its final payload, propelling the lifeless oval object towards the closing carrier with the force of a cruiser railgun round.

"Full power to directional thrusters! Helm, hard to bottom! Brace for impact!"

The attempt to dodge the supersonic projectile was admirable, but not entirely successful. The kinetic hammer smashed against the lower port bow section of the carrier, punching through the six layers of armors like a perforated can. The heavy ball continued to knock through several bulkheads with ease, causing explosive decompression in several hallways and chambers.

Then, its modest warhead detonated, shaking the entire ship and severing entire power grids along with frying a few unfortunate spacers. The damage that single buster had caused dwarfed any other attack performed by the mercenaries so far. Even the streakers that ripped the Evie's armor on the other side of the ship a few moments later was nothing but a fleabite.

"Damage report!" Claris hollered over the din of tearing metal and scream-filled channels.

"Three hallways are blown into space! Secondary data room is compromised. Torpedo room is severely scorched, casualties uncertain as of yet! Grid efficiency has dropped to seventy-seven percent! Thruster agility is reduced by nine percent!"

The damage was severe, but the ship survived, and that was all that mattered. Claris pushed away the damage report from her visuals and concentrated on the enemy's disposition. There were only six fighters left, and their single surviving bomber was all out of bombs.

"Turret two operating at forty-four percent efficiency! The main gun is offline!"

"What?" The lieutenant turned to Weapons Officer Stacy in astonishment. "Fix the main gun!"

"Can't, ma'm! The chamber is open to vacuum and the power lines are completely burnt through. I'm diverting the operators to damage control."

It looked like their opponents were closer to par than Claris thought. Both sides had lost roughly forty percent of their capabilities. The Evie was left with only three operational turrets, and the mercenaries were left with six remaining fighters. Along with that, the damage their ship sustained reduced her overall effectiveness, while the fighters expended all of their missiles. Any further attack runs would run closer than any of them were comfortable with. The minor blind spot the Evie now sported in her turret coverage would certainly be exploited by the desperate fighters.

The question was, would the mercenaries accept the risks and press the Evie on, or would they return to their mothership to rearm their missiles? As the sensor plot displayed the fighters circling back for

another attack run, the situation didn't look so rosy for Claris and the rest of the pirate crew.

The Starlight Constellation was not a purpose-built warship. The medium-sized ore hauler was already fairly old when her previous owner sold her for scrap, only to be snapped up by Orion and his group for a bargain. They had done a few jobs for a local Titanian shipyard and gained the owner's favor, earning them a discount in the transformation of the ship into a veritable carrier. While the Starlight would never have the structural strength and offensive armaments required to last long when engaged directly, her roomy hangar bay was enough of a weapon in itself. With ten fighters, you didn't even need multiple layers of armor.

However, it still didn't change the fact that the ship was still a weakness in itself in their fleet. The tendency for transports and haulers to automate every system to the extreme provided several advantages to any boarders. First, you didn't have to subdue so many crewmen. Second, certain unsupervised systems were just too easy to sabotage.

At the same time though, technology was capable of many things. Even the oldest starships still in use carried amazingly effective monitoring systems. While Harry's invisibility cloak had bypassed most of them, the moment the ship's computers registered Arianna Spencer's fluctuating life signs, the alarms went off.

'Fuck! They didn't told me about this.'

The hatch to the command and control room automatically slammed shut, locking Harry and the handful of unconscious operators inside. He quickly fired his revolver at the work stations to fry them into uselessness. He then revolved the bullet chamber and fired at the reinforced hatch, letting several Reductors slam against the warping surface. The civilian-grade armor parted easily enough, letting Harry's bulky armored form squeeze through.

"There he is!"

Some semi-uniformed group of spacers fired their pistols and rifles at Harry, but his armor held firmly against the pulses. He fired back at the soldiers as he moved closer, achieving some broken bones and severed limbs. As much as the boy like to move faster, he

couldn't, due to his lack of training with the armor. Harry had to move slow enough to let the suit's internal monitors pick up his movement and predict his desired movements. If he went too fast, the relevant armor limb would lock up its internal motors, paralyzing the wearer in a critical moment. Mastering boarding armor was a subtle art – you just had to develop a feel for it. A feel that the wizard had obviously not attained.

"Jeezes that guy's got some sort of pressure gun! Get to cover!"

The soldiers ran back faster than Harry could gain on them in with lumbering gait. Some of them retracted a panel from the bulkhead and fiddled with it. Suddenly, the side walls deployed some sort of improvised cover for the defenders to cower behind. It took several of Harry's shots to punch through, but that gave the crewmen enough time to draw back to another set of deployable cover.

'This is getting fucking ridiculous.'

Feeling increasingly frustrated, Harry changed his pistol's setting back to Fiendfyre and went on to scorch the pistol's flames right over the cover. Several people burned right then and there, but the remaining survivors just continued to pull back. Even though their pulses dented nothing on Harry's armor, the defenders just didn't give up. Why were they so insistent in drawing out the fight like this?

Unless...

"Gotcha, dumbass!"

The artificial gravity that kept Harry's feet on the floor suddenly intensified to up to four times of Earth's regular gravity. Finding out that you suddenly weighed two-hundred-and-forty kilograms instead of just sixty was a shock to his body. With the heavy weight of the boarding armor piled on top of his regular bodyweight, Harry could not even lift his arms to fire his revolver.

Also, there was no spell in the top of his mind that could negate the effects of gravity. Wizards and witches never had to deal with this kind of warfare.

"He's stuck! Jimmy, hurry up with that plasma torch before he gets out!"

A vacuum-suited spacer came into view. His working outfit was clean and blue like the rest of the crew's uniforms. What made this person different from the rest was the bulky fuel module strapped on his back. A thick feed ran out the bottom and ended at the machinegun-sized cutting tool. A tightly focused plasma blade jutted out of the top, promising instant death to anything it came into touch.

'I can't believe I'm about to feed my curses again..'

Before the defenders' very eyes, the intruder disappeared. Before they could even blink, the armored invader appeared only a few meters away followed by a loud pop. Harry landed in a pile, but was quick to sort out his limbs and fire his pistol at anyone he could see from his tangled pose. Three more crewmen burned to death before Harry aimed his fire spitter at the spacer carrying the plasma torch. The man could only gape at the firearm before unnatural heat engulfed his body. The fuel module followed almost instantly.

Boom!

The plasma contained in the backpack module freed itself violently, splashing the entire corridor with positive ions heated to thousands of degrees. A large chunk of the entire corridor simply didn't exist anymore, having been molten through into other corridors and rooms. Even Harry barely escaped unscathed. If it wasn't for the many wards carved into his armor, he would have suffered more than some superficial pit marks.

A tiny alarm did show something disconcerting though. His armor wasn't vacuum-sealed anymore. The suit automatically filled the holes with some sort of rapid-hardening foam, but it wouldn't hold up to anything more than a punch.

The plan was getting off to a botched off start. Claris, Zhang, and even Harry himself had underestimated the sophistication of the ship's defenses. None of Harry's advisers thought that Orion's group would put so much effort modifying and reinforcing the old cargo hauler to a reasonable combat standard. Installing anti-boarding enhancements such as localized gravity control and retractable bulkhead cover was intensive work and beyond the scope of most civilian contractors. Even the Eviscerator lacked localized gravity countermeasures.

Knowing that maintaining stealth was useless, Harry opened a direct channel to the ship. "Claris, I've been found out. What should I do?"

The grainy visuals painted a picture of chaos and panic on the bridge. Claris didn't even address him at first, being too occupied in ordering emergency countermeasures and other urgent matters. Only when there was a lull in the battle did her stressful gaze meet his own.

"Captain, the situation is desperate here. The Evie has taken a lot of beating here. The enemy's remaining six fighters are playing havoc with our subsystems, taking them out one by one. We'll lose our turrets soon if this goes on for more than five minutes. Forget about placing charges over the entire ship. Just go straight for the command ring!"

The channel turned to static, and Harry cleared the window from his viewscape. He oriented himself and walked towards the bridge as fast as he could from the wreckage he left behind. Minutes passed as he followed the blueprints provided by Star, often coming up against dead ends or open spaces where there should have been none. Since the bridge was at the very bow of the carrier, he eventually made it through and came up against a sturdy hatch. It looked to be twice as thick as all the other entryways.

Thicker or not, it was not rated to last long against successive applications of Fiendfyre.

Compared to the men he faced in the bowels of the ship, the handful of officers that controlled the cargo ships were soft. Not pansies by any means, but they just weren't creative enough to put up a good fight. When he stepped inside, Harry expected the incoming grenades. He simply slipped back out and let the 'nades bounce back from one of his low-powered charms. After that, it was a trivial matter knocking out the remaining pests with simple stuns.

The all-too-vital command ring was easy enough to find. It was child's play to slip it from the captain's finger.

The deceptively unassuming adornment was actually the key to mastery over the entire ship. In an age of far-reaching digitization and electronic calculations, every computer system was vulnerable

to tampering. Career hackers, intelligence outfits and even rampant AIs could gain access to every system through a simple open sensor port. If such intruders were allowed access to critical functions such as gravity or reactor cooling, the damage they could inflict was extreme. Whole wars could be won and lost depending on which side employed the better hackers. The only way to really become immune to such types of attacks was to go back to analogue. Effective, but unpalatable.

To counter this digital threat, space vessels were designed with programming rigidity in mind. The first type of protection was the use of permanently coded programming. Moving beyond magnetically or optically stored 0's and 1's, the military was the first institution to adopt multiphasic crystal circuits. Most of the code stored in these resilient circuits were burned in by specialized manufacturers. The crystal and the coding it contained was extremely resilient to all manner of external shock, including EMP. Viruses and rogue AIs might be able to proliferate in temporary buffers, but they could not alter the core programming of most vital systems controlled by these crystals.

The second type of protection the military introduced was physical authentication and channeling. All the control crystals were tied to one singular Ship Crystal, which was the ultimate controller and regulator onboard the starship. Every command issued by every individual crewmen would pass through the Ship Crystal first before being directed onwards to the relevant systems such as lights or thrusters. However, there were just some critical systems that could not be controlled by anyone, such as the all-too-delicate inertial dampeners. However, in some situations captains needed to have emergency control over these untouchable systems. But how to grant top-level access to the captain without leaving the door open for hackers?

That was done through possession of the command ring. It was actually a very high grade control crystal that underwent a lot of advanced modifications. The metal shell was just there to give the illusion that the contraption was a ring. Complex programming and ultra-advanced engineering insured the ring would only work when it was firmly attached to a bare human finger. Only then would it link up to the Ship Crystal itself, of which the command ring's crystal was actually apart of before they were both separated in the production

process. This provided an unhackable and foolproof method against unauthorized access of the ship's controls.

However, there was only one weakness to the entire protection scheme. The command ring couldn't distinguish between its owners. As long as any human wore the ring, he could do pretty much everything on the ship. To stop the rampage, the ship's crew could destroy the Ship Crystal nestled deep within the centre of the ship, but that would take too long and leave the ship as a virtual husk. The spacers could also destroy the minor control crystals of each specific section. This was a more viable option due to their uniformity. Every space vessel carried spare crystals containing the same programming that could be used to replace the broken one after sustaining damage.

Still, severing the connection between the command ring and the control crystals took time. Time that the half-reduced crew of this ship didn't have.

When Harry momentarily removed his gauntlet to slip on the silver ring, his entire suit's interface lighted up and expanded to include a visual of the carrier's readiness. A few portions were marked in red and yellow, but the rest of the map looked a little bit too perfectly green. Using the fingerpads embedded on the inside of his gloves, Harry navigated the interface and performed a few essential commands.

First, he shut and sealed every hatch. No one could go in or out of their current location. This also sealed the hangar doors, making it impossible for the enemy strike craft to land or launch.

Second, he deactivated the artificial gravity. Any conscious crewmembers who were thinking of cutting through the hatches would find it extremely difficult to even move around when floating in zero gravity.

Third, he ordered a change in the mix of air. The air scrubbers let out less air, reducing local pressure and making it hard for anyone to breathe. More oxygen was drawn off as well to help off the hardest spacer into lala-land. Only the hangar crew remained conscious though. Their frequent exposure to vacuum necessitated them to wear their vacuum suits constantly in order to service returning fighters during a prolonged engagement.

To deal with the conscious hangar crew, Harry first pumped excess air into the airless hangar. He then cranked open the main hangar door to create a ten centimeter gap into space. The just pumped in air then promptly escaped through the opening, drawing the weightless hangar crew along with it. Those who did not manage to grab onto something solid smashed into the bulkheads with enough force to bruise hard and knock them into unconsciousness.

'Take that.'

While the boy could have spaced the crew entirely, he had to keep some leverage for the next stage of the plan.

Now that all the loose ends were dealt with, Harry engaged the main thrusters. The Starlight Constellation slowly started to cruise towards the Eviscerator. If the mobile carrier had any effective weapons left, it could easily rake or destroy this ship.

With that done, he waded through the menus until he found the selected reactor controls. Holding the options ready, Harry then used the command ring to gain access to the enemy's command channel. It was time to negotiate.

"Attention, mercenaries. This is Captain Harry of the Eviscerator. Cease fire immediately and fall back. I'm not going to warn you twice."

A new face popped up, showing the helmeted black-bearded figure of one of the fighters currently in battle. "This is Orion, lead partner of the Orion Constellations. Who the fuck do you think you are, brat?"

Harry couldn't help but smirk. "A brat who in complete command over your mothership." And to prove it, he streamed a security visual to Orion showing the messy state of the bridge. "Don't worry, they're just unconscious... mostly. Now are you going to pull your forces out or not?"

The lead pilot looked like he was about to run off his mouth, but then calmed his fury. "And what if we don't?"

Sighing, Harry flipped the control he had ready in case Orion needed more convincing. "Look at your sensor feed."

Emergency valves located along the outer hull retracted in themselves, revealing several holes. A fine spray of coolant leaked from the gaps, surrounding the sides of the Starlight with luminescent mist. It was almost as if the vessel released a puff of cigarette smoke. The amount of coolant being pushed out into space was relatively limited, only a tenth of a percent. The reactor actually cooled due to the venting of heat in the form of steam. Still, with less fluid left, the reactor would soon heat up the same tank of coolant, warming it up every cycle until the entire pipes would burst under the enormous pressure.

"By Mercury, you're a real mad sunovabitch, aren't ya?"

"I'm still waiting, Orion. If your fighter wings don't pull back from my ship, I'll dump out a quarter of your reactor coolant every fifteen seconds."

The veteran pilot disengaged from the commandnet, probably to confer with his fellow pilots in private. Just as the first fifteen seconds went past, the leader returned on the net.

"Fine, fine! We'll pull out if you stop the leak right now."

"For now." Harry agreed, and relayed the command. The reactor coolant stabilized at its current levels and the mist stopped spreading out. "Here you go, now pull out from the fight. The Eviscerator won't pursue."

The screen plot in the centre of the bridge showed six tiny dots moving away from a larger one. Several quiet minutes passed until the fighters were well out of the way. Harry had the sense that the mercenaries were furiously arguing with each other on what they should do next. Things didn't look too good for them, although the Eviscerator wasn't doing too well either. Even from the Starlight's scanners he could see the scorch marks and ruptures along her once pearly hull. If either sides wanted to fight to the death, the mercenaries would have decent odds if they manage to take out the Evie's two remaining turrets.

In a way, Harry and Orion both held each other hostage. Harry could self-destruct the mothership if the mercenaries didn't do what he want, while the mercenaries could take out the Eviscerator with heavy losses if they had no other hope. Harry wasn't going to push the mercs into a corner though. The Evie had taken enough of a battering and he just wanted this job over with. The next talk would determine everyone's fates.

"Alright, we're out of missile range, Captain Harry. Now, shall we talk? What are your demands?"

It took only a moment for Harry to retrieve the list Claris had prepared for him in advance.

"First, I want you and your entire mercenary group to power down and scuttle all your weapon mounts. Then, I want you to surrender the convoy transports to me intact and in working condition. Finally, I want you to retreat from this area."

"No can do. We're bound by contract to ensure the transport's safe passage. Mercenary honor won't allow anything less."

"Don't give me that mercenary honor crap." Harry spat. "Is your precious honor worth more than the lives of your crew? Or that pretty little brunette up in the command room? With just one press of a button, I can fill the entire room with carbon monoxide."

The mercenary looked heavily conflicted for a moment, and veered off to talk with someone else on another channel. He eventually relented though. "Fair enough. But I do not have authority over the individual transport captains. I can't order them to halt their flight. They won't listen to me."

Getting rather impatient, Harry began to scowl. "Then please tell the fair captains of those transports that if they do not power down their ships, put them in lockdown, and surrender their command rings to me intact, then I will use my mobile carrier, my interceptors and even this little dump of a carrier to hunt them all down and shoot them to pieces. I'll ram this ship against a transport if that takes too long, understand? Do not test my patience."

"Please... please wait."

Orion withdrew from the commandnet again, probably to confer with his fellow pilots and with the transport captains themselves. By demanding the surrender of the transports, Harry had raised the stakes of the game. It would have been a big pain in the butt to pursue the scattered cargo haulers with just his own forces. With only two interceptors and one damaged mobile carrier, they could maybe catch up to three, but the other two haulers would be long gone by then. Asking Orion to hand the transports in a silver platter was a much more convenient solution.

The channel reopened again. Orion's grim face glared at Harry's triumphant grin with pure loathing. "I've notified the transport captains and we've reached a consensus. Our offer to you is this: we will allow you to take possession of all five transports and their cargo. However, we will only hand over the command rings to you after we've ferried all of the civilian crew over to the Starlight Constellation. They will travel to my ship by escape pod. Once that is done, I would like you to hand Starlight's command ring back to me, and then we will both go our separate ways."

"And your weapons? I noticed you seem to have conveniently forget to mention your fighters."

The man smiled sardonically at the response. "Our fighters and the weapons they possess are our only guarantee of your cooperation. Disarmament is not an option."

"Fair enough. As long as your fighters are out of weapons range from the Eviscerator, her interceptors, and this ship, we won't attack. Is this a deal?"

"Deal."

The mercenaries held to their word. The fighters held back from doing anything rash, and the transports stopped their frantic scramble and returned to the Starlight like tired cows. As the Evie gained valuable time in patching up her holes, the transport crews slowly shut off system after system as they went about the long process of locking down their transports.

Harry wasn't sure if any of them were sincere enough not to leave some trap or other form of sabotage, but they knew very well that the mobile carrier could catch up easily to the old and slow Starlight

Constellation to take revenge. On the other hand, the fighters retained their deadliness as well. The small craft could still make a devastating attack run on the Eviscerator. Both sides were better off in the end if they held to the terms of their deal.

After three hours of slow-going repair, lockdown, and evacuation, Orion finally left his fighter to float in space and boarded a spare escape pod to return to his carrier. The hangar bay, now crowded with other escape pods and masses of injured hangar crew, still had enough space left to admit his craft. The grim pilot left the exhausted pod and headed to the back of the hangar where the armored Harry met the mercenary leader. With the command ring on one hand and his revolver on the other, the wizard was able to keep the disgruntled mercenary and civilian crews from doing anything rash.

"So you are the upstart who somehow infiltrated my carrier. How did you manage to sneak past our best sensors?"

Harry just smiled.

"Not telling, huh? Well that's fine. I can study the logs later. In any case," Orion withdrew a pouch from one of his flight suit pockets. He widened the noose to show all five gleaming rings. "They're the real deal. Do you want to test them all or can we skip it and exchange the rings already?"

"Not exactly." The boy raised the finger attached to the Starlight Constellation's command ring. "If I hand you this ring right now, you can do all sorts of things to trap me or kill me while I'm still onboard this ship. I'm not going to fall for that trap. No, this is how it's going to go: you hand over all five transport ship command rings, and I'll board one of those little escape pods and make my way out in space. When I'm outside this ship's turret range, I'll release the ring attached to a beacon so you can pick it up when I'm not at your mercy."

The older man thought on Harry's proposal. "I suppose my remaining fighters will insure you won't blow up the Starlight. Just release the command ring before you're halfway back to your mobile carrier, or else I'll send in my fighters anyway, hostages or not. I can't let you go back safe in the confines of your ship with all the cards still in your hands."

"That is... acceptable. Yes, quite acceptable." Grinning, Harry proceeded forward and held out his hand. The mercenary grumbly dropped the pouch onto the outstretched palm. When Harry offered a handshake, Orion shook it with more than a little tension. "A pleasure doing business with you, Captain Harry. Just keep in mind that I will hunt you down and kill you someday."

"Likewise." Harry offered back as he proceeded to an idle escape pod and make his way back to the Eviscerator. There was still a lot of work to be done. The damaged ship needed to get her holes plugged and her turrets brought back up. He also needed to draw up skeleton crews to operate the five abandoned transports. Then he needed to safely escort the cargo haulers all the way to the Trindebal pirate station, which was certainly at least a month away. Anything could happen during that time.

That reminded him of Star's mission. Harry wasn't even sure the Class X beam laser and its accompanying power generator was even on the transports. At least Harry had checked it wasn't on the Starlight Constellation itself – the battleship-grade weapon mount was simply too big to hide some corner.

Though the battered Evie didn't come out of this fight unscathed, all in all this was a successful first mission. A handful more of these types of missions and he would soon be reunited with the full potential of his magic.

'Three hundred million credits, here I come.'

End Notes: I know that the sex that some of you have been requesting has been pretty dry so far (perverts), but I'm still considering the best way to deal with this with the constraints of this website. Although I know that every author on this site gets away with lemons, I am still reluctant to break that unenforced rule.

Triumphant Return

Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Such sayings have rung true since the dawn of human civilization. From Emperor Napoleon, to the dreaded Hitler, to President Vickson, to Field Marshal Marlboro-Riddle, to Chairman Tingru, history was replete with tyrants who let their hatred and obsessions run their ultimate course. So why wasn't Master Harry doing the same and indulge himself with his power? Even with three-thirds of the crew away and crewing the five captured transports, the repair work on the Eviscerator wasn't that intensive enough to command his complete attention. He did so anyway.

Claris had tried countless of times to entice Harry to relax himself, preferably with her. But the young man only continued to mutter to himself as he continued to draw pentagrams and other unintelligible letters along every crack and every piece of broken equipment. Sure, seeing him mutter *Reparo* and find a burnt out gravity module turn as good as new was impressive, but it wasn't exactly essential to their needs. All the really important subsystems were all repaired in the first week since the engagement with the Orion Constellations. With the powergrid and turrets restored to a reasonable shape, there was nothing else to be worried about. But Harry continued with the armor paneling, the vacuum sealing, the environmental filters, and much much more. The rest of the broken stuff on the repair list were so minor that it was better to just let a repair yard handle the work. Harry wouldn't listen though. He was so obsessive in his need to put his ship back in peak condition.

What was worse was when he did go off and relax, he would frequently choose to visit Dr. Selner in the medical bay. They'd talk about the wounded languishing in the beds, the dead freezing in the morgue, and even stray to the topic of magic. One time Claris even spied them at the mess hall, sharing a coffee with each other as if they were friends!

The pirate lieutenant sat up from her desk and went over to the full-sized mirror embedded within the paneling of her quarters. Why wasn't she catching Harry's attention anymore? Was it her dark hair? Her blue eyes? Maybe it was her bust. Claris had to admit that Selner was a little more endowed, but her own body was slimmer and her ass was much shapelier. Maybe it was her uniform. Did she accentuate her body too little or too much? New designs and color

schemes popped in her mind. Harry was very enamored with the colors red and black.

Maybe it was the boots. Her utilitarian combat boots were all the fashion this season, but Harry never even peeked at them. Perhaps she should start wearing her heels? Selner wore them too.. perhaps that was her secret. Or perhaps not. It was just too frustrating to figure out what would catch her master's attention. If only Harry was normal.

Then again, normal guys were boring.

"It's not your looks, you know."

Clariss instantly drew her pistol and turned around to face the speaker. "You again."

The sad sight of Dr. Arnaud Rodriguez's insubstantial form hovered closer to Clariss. "Oh just put the gun away already, you'll just scorch your room."

"Don't you have anything better to do than violate a lady's privacy?" She spat, but put her gun back in her holster. "Besides, why do you care?"

"Why should I not care? Obviously you are unhappy. I've observed you many times looking wistfully at the young captain, even going so far as to spy on him through the security feeds."

That brought a small bit of blush to the woman. "Maybe I should just ask Harry to confine you in the closet."

"Oh, he wouldn't." The ghost smirked then. "But if Selner asked him nicely, he might grant her a favor..."

The pirate let out a scream of rage. "Fuck you!" She grabbed a nearby flower vase and threw the entire ensemble at the ghost. The expensive artifact broke in pieces, spilling roses and nutrient fluids on the floor. Cleanbots streamed in from a gap in the wall and quickly cleaned up the mess, leaving hardly any trace behind of what had happened.

"That was not very lady-like."

"Fine." She let out as she hopped on her luxurious heart-shaped bed and leaned back. "Since you're not planning to go away any time soon, just go ahead and spill whatever dumb advice you're so eager to give me."

The ghost hovered over to her bed and sat next to her laying form, at least as best as he could manage. "I've spent weeks studying the captain, trying to figure out his weaknesses. I've seen him deal with your subtle attempts at seduction and I've seen him smile at Dr. Selner's comments. I've observed him watching the women around him like any other boy his age would do, but I've also seen him brush off even your most brazen suggestions. I think that after hundreds of hours, I pretty much have him figured out, at least on what kind of company he prefers."

"So will you tell me already, you stupid ghost?"

"I have a name, you know. It's Arnaud."

"Okay, whatever. Just tell me already, Arnold."

The ghost sighed, but went on anyway. "This is just a hypothesis, so don't put too much stock in my ideas. In essence, I believe that Harry is in a constant pursuit of strength. It is why he always spends his time pursuing it by studying books and drawing arcane symbols everywhere. The repairs he performs on non-essential systems is a way for him to practice the ritual. If you go back to your security logs you will notice that he becomes more efficient in the process, drawing circles and symbols faster than the previous time and using up less blood at the same time. He is trying to ingrain the movements in his muscle memory so that he can draw them later when he is under pressure. So you see, everything he does has a reason and a result. And that result is to make him stronger than he was before."

"What about Selner? Spending time with that whiny bitch won't make him any stronger."

"On the contrary, Claris. Her work is essential to the well-being of the crew and the ship. Her part in extraction the crew's blood every standard day is vital in keeping the boy supplied with fresh blood."

But that isn't all. There is one more reason why Harry enjoys Dr. Selner's company."

"And what is that?"

Arnaud raised his fist and clenched it. "Her courage. Her defiance in standing up against Harry's cruelties. In short, her strength. Try to compare Selner's composure to yours. What does Harry think when he meets up with Selner? He sees her as a principled woman, someone who regards him as neither a threat nor a god. He knows that if he comes to visit her that he can expect a deep and thought-provoking discussion, far away from the tiresome routines of running a ship."

"And... me?" Claris whispered, almost dreading Arnaud's next words.

"You.. you are like a servant, one of many in his retinue. Sure, you may be closer to him than the rest of the crew, but ultimately you are still beneath him. He treats you like he would treat a favored pet. He rejects your seductions as he would stop a dog from licking his face. Your constant devotions to him such as calling him Master or Lord is somewhat bothersome to him. Any exaggerated title annoys him, actually. Do you understand my point?"

She did. As much as it hurt to hear the reasons of Harry's inattention, she couldn't deny the soundness of Arnaud's theory. Claris had been going about enticing Harry into her web in a very wrong way. Her fault was to assume that Harry would be a person ruled by his base desires. Someone who has not only hungry for power, but had the constant need to show it off to the world. She offered herself to him as an ornament who he could be in complete control. Most men would relish having that sort of power over a gorgeous woman such as her. Harry though... Harry was different.

"I see you realize for yourself now your mistakes." The shade spoke out. "Do not try to become his servant. Become his companion instead. Offer him something that he would appreciate, such as knowledge or something else that would put him further into the path to power. Don't come to him – let him come to you. As long as you remain interesting in his company, you will have plenty of chances. Despite his unnatural powers and his odd behavior, he is still a man."

The advice was sound and would definitely help Claris put herself back in the race. But why was this ghost giving her this advice? If anything, he would have tried anything to spread lies and sow discontent amongst the crew.

"Why are you being so helpful? Are you trying to gain my favor?"

"Partly that. Partly because your survival, and the ship's survival is in my best interest." The ghost swept his arm around him, encompassing the entire ship. "I am bound in time and space to the Eviscerator. When the ship went to battle against the Orion Constellations, I could almost feel every rupture, every burn and every loss of life. People died right in front of me, unable to even whisper me their last words. I saw desperation in everyone else who remained alive, trying so hard to save their ship. As an intangible being I could do nothing to assist. It made me feel utterly helpless and reduced me to incessant worry of my fate if the ship gets destroyed. I do not want to be stuck in empty space until the end of the universe many billions of years later. Believe it or not, Claris, but the survival of the ship is in my best interests. It is a fate no different than Selner's and Zhang's. In the end, we all serve Harry."

The ghost left her quarters then, passing through the thick reinforced bulkhead as if it was nothing but air. Arnaud's words have given her a lot of food for thought. She reflected on herself, trying to visualize her interactions with the wizard and how he responded to her advances. It was painfully obvious now how Harry brushed her off with the faintest signs of contempt. This was a man who had no need for toys. He was playing a much bigger game. One in which there is little room for servants.

To enter the game, Claris needed to elevate herself to his level. It was time to go back to the Queen she once were.

No matter how rich, how powerful or how dastardly evil you were, you always needed to have your accounts in order. It would be quite embarrassing to commission a superweapon and only come up short. Terry made sure that all the numbers added up and that no one would try to skim some credits off any transaction.

Performing this duty after the successful raid on the convoy was proving to be a herculean task though. Each cargo hauler contained up to forty-thousand tons of construction material and trade goods

per hold. That made the total bounty up to two-hundred-thousand tons, although the real net total was a little less due to the removal and destruction of the Class X beam laser and its power generator.

They didn't destroy the massive weapon components completely, of course. Harry had ordered a detail to dismantle and extract all of the most valuable components, such as the reactor core, the containment shell, the high-grade focus lens, the heat resistant inner bore, and other expensive parts. What was left behind was either too common or too toxic to handle, so the remaining trash was smashed apart by the Eviscerator's guns.

All of the scavenged components along with the other cargo added up to an almost endless list of valuable and not-so-valuable goods that needed to be sold. While their convoy was still many millions of kilometers away from Trindebal Station, communication was still possible over millions of kilometers of distance. Only a small annoying time lag was present whenever he accessed the pirate station's local marketnet. Provided with a list of Claris' extensive contacts, Terry was tasked to find buyers for every single piece of loot and finish the task before they came into port. A delay in selling the goods was undesirable. Unsold goods had to be moved into warehouses, which cost credits, which reduced everyone's total payout. That meant that practically every pirate and even a few of her former science colleagues were pressing him on to maximize everyone's profit.

"Hey there Terry." Felicity greeted the working young man as she seated herself on the mess table opposite to him. Without any regard for modesty she immediately dug into her meal of carrots, mashed potatoes and sausages. "So how's it going? Any luck on the creds?"

The man's face grew irritable. He had already been bugged five times this day. "Not you too?"

"What? Isn't a girl allowed to know how well you're doing?"

"You hardly talked to me before we were roped into this pirate thing. You just want to know how much credits your share will be like everyone else."

"Okay, you got me." The blond shrugged. "But we're working together now as a team, so soften up with that attitude. After all, I'm the one who operates the main gun."

"Yeah yeah, everyone knows you're important and how Harry's lucky to have a former Solardyne engineer in his service, so stop lording it over us."

All signs of playfulness disappeared. "I'm trying to be nice here, Terry."

"Oh that's great coming from the mouth of a wannabe cutthroat. Haven't you read the pirate manual yet how you're not supposed to be nice to people?"

"Hey, pirates are people too. They're actually quite decent once they get over the fact that Harry defeated them by himself."

"You're actually making friends with those murdering bastards?" Terry asked with accusation stinging in his voice. "They would have raped you if they had their way. You're crazy."

Fed up, the woman dropped her spork and sat up from her seat. If Terry didn't want her company, that was his choice. "I'm just making a new life for myself under Harry. You should come out of your shell and try it yourself. Even Selner is starting to talk with the wounded pirates under her care."

With that, Felicity took her tray and went towards another table. One occupied completely by the heartless pirate crew.

"Care if I join you guys and gals?"

"Sure, no problem Felly!"

Ignoring all the bantering, the quiet bookkeeper went back to work. He focused himself on finishing up the negotiations for a container load of hover modules. Just because he was doing Harry's whims didn't mean that he had resigned himself to his new fate. Despite all the wonders Harry could produce, he was still a mortal. The captain drank, ate, slept and even went to the toilet like every other man. All Terry had to do was keep his head down and be patient. It might take months or years, but eventually the little bastard will slip up.

And when he does, the unassuming bookkeeper would be waiting. With a weapon in hand.

The month long journey to the famed Trindebal Station was finally at its end. All the drudgery and repair work would cease, leaving every crew member to engulf themselves in the debauchery that would await them on shore. And from the crowded traffic around them, they weren't the only ones to enjoy the station's offerings.

Hundreds, perhaps up to a thousand other vessels coasted about under the massive station's mighty defenses. Most were fighters or corvettes, but there were also a few other mobile carriers like the Evie in the neighborhood. More imposing however were the impressive pirate fleets, owned and crewed by the most successful and bloodthirsty buccaneers this side of the universe. The largest fleet was of course owned by the same pirate gang that owned the station. The Callistoan Mafia guarded their valuable base with more than a little paranoia. Scores of corvettes lined up to incoming and outgoing visitors, scanning their cargo holds and making sure they weren't up to no good. Squadrons of frigates and mobile carriers patrolled the dockyards and piers to ensure no ship would power up their weapons and take a shot at the main station.

Even if that were to happen though, the stations impressive armaments could slice up nearly anything. Hundreds of point defense turrets dotted the cylinder-shaped construction, covering and double covering every single angle of approach. Larger triple-barreled turrets took care of any corvette and frigate class attackers. As for capital ships, the station had something special in mind.

Eight monstrous dreadnought beam lasers were spread evenly along the station's surface, offering a wide angle of view in every direction. Just turning the frigate-sized turret required a power train that was strong enough to pull an asteroid from Jupiter's orbit. The single-barreled Class XI weapon mounts were rated to vaporize entire battleships with just thirty seconds of constant focus. Usually though, only a few seconds was enough to melt a capital ship's weapon mounts and other vulnerable subsystems. With millions of liters of coolant stored inside the station, the beam lasers did not even have to cut off power to turn around and devastate another ship.

Under such immediate threat of annihilation, the implications was clear: don't mess with the Callistoan Maffia.

Harry sat at his command chair for once, not because he felt like it, but because the station's inspectors expected him to be in charge. He had to handle communiqués from half a dozen patrol corvettes, all demanding the same bribes, before he could start to negotiate a berth at the station's dry dock.

Still, even after all the administrative stuff was done, Harry continued to enjoy his position of power as he stared at the closing station. There was a sense of returning home as a victor.

"Beautiful, isn't it, Claris?"

His second, who was working on a detailed repair report for the dry dock at the observer's seat, smiled back as best she could without looking too eager at being addressed.

"That it is, captain."

The bridge fell back into silence once more until Terry finally finished his financial report. "Captain, the Frontier Bank finished confirming our mission results. They just transferred the credits to your ship's account. The scrap yards have also finished receiving the five captured prizes and their cargo."

"Excellent." Harry grinned, and so did the rest of the crew. This single job had earned them a huge bounty in earnings, far more than the measly hundreds of thousands of credits Captain Hargrave pursued. "Forward me the summary, will you?"

The demure accountant did so after putting in the final updates. The screen in front of Harry lighted up, but since it was one of his private displays, no one could read off the numbers.

Still, from Harry's growing grin, the payout was likely to be massive.

"Claris, please open up a ship-wide channel. Also put me in connection with the prize crews waiting on the station."

Everyone in his command received an audio and visual feed of the captain. Every display screen and every holoprojector lit up to

provide the visuals. In that one, singular moment, the entire crew paid attention to Harry, and this time they not in fear for their lives.

"My crew." Harry began as he sat up to face the recorder fully. "Through your hard work and enduring will, we've accomplished a smashing raid against a convoy. No one could have beaten back the Orion Constellations and seize all five ships intact except for you. We have managed the impossible and returned triumphant with our booty. I'm sure you are all curious how much that affects your credit chits. Well, Terry has been kind enough to finalize our total earnings for this expedition. In short, our combined income from the commission and the sale of our captured prizes is over thirty-five million credits."

Thirty-five. Million. Credits.

The bridge soon erupted into wild hoops and cheers. Thirty-five million was a spectacular success for any job. Heck, they could buy a fleet of corvettes or even another mobile carrier with that amount of money.

Not that each crewmen would be paid in millions. The captain would keep seventy-five percent of the share. The three officers under his command would divide the next ten percent amongst themselves. The remaining fifteen percent would be doled out to the remainder of the crew. A select few such as the medical officer, the pilots and the chiefs of several systems would receive double shares. The rest of the old pirate crew would receive full shares, while the new civilian crew would receive only half shares except for those who have proved themselves, such as Felicity and her two assistants.

Still, even for the lowliest of conscripts, their share of the spoils would total to about a hundred-and-seventy-five thousand credits.

"Be proud of yourselves. You earned it. Along with the advancement of your shares, I'll grant you a full week of leave so you can spend all your hard-earned creds. Just don't spend them all on drink and whores. We're going to go on a lot more dangerous missions from now on, so buy a good set of gear for yourself. I expect you all to have a personal suit of boarding armor. Captain, out."

As the cheers finally died down, Harry turned to the less pleasant side of his victory. "Terry, please forward me the dry dock's proposal."

There was much to do in the next few days. The repairs and upgrades he requested would eat up valuable credits. Buying two new strike craft and crewing them with decent pilots would expend a little more credits. Finding a new job that would earn even more than their previous one would take a lot of time as well, in the meanwhile wasting more credits to pay docking charges and other 'fees'. The station was a money trap where the longer you stayed, the more ways they would find excuses to siphon credits to their accounts.

"We're on final approach to the dry dock, sir." Nicholas called out. "The tugboat is latching on in three, two, one."

The ship bumped slightly as magnetic clamps held on to the nose of the Eviscerator.

"Main thrusters disengaged. Powering down reactor. All systems nominal."

"Good." Harry acknowledged, and sat up from his chair to leave the bridge. "Clariss, please take over. I'll be in my cabin until we have finished docking. Please prepare a personal schedule for my approval."

"Yes, captain."

Much of the ship was in a festive mood. Why wouldn't the crew be ecstatic? An average job under Captain Hargrave would pay out only ten thousand credits or so for a full share. A week at the whorehouse would suck that all up. Now, with the pay of their first job under Harry finally in their hands, they had enough credits to fuck a whore every day for half a year. Of course, with only a week's leave, they couldn't spend all that money in that time. So they planned to visit the most expensive courtesans who usually serviced captains and admirals.

However, all the talk about sex was extremely tiring for one certain individual.

"Ugh, how repulsing!" Dr. Selner let out as she dropped her own credit chit on her desk. "They've got enough money to start a business or buy an apartment, but instead they all let their crotches make their spending decisions. Did you hear that Felicity is planning to hire five gigolos for three straight days? Can you imagine that! No wait, don't."

"To be fair, Lily, pirates usually don't live that long to enjoy their retirement." Zhang responded as he absently studied one of the vials of blue glowing liquids in her lab. Was it radioactive? "They're used to living by the moment. Besides, Harry won't release any of his men from his service this soon. What use is it to buy a business when you can't even work there?"

"They could, you know, invest or something. Make some side earnings."

"Trindebal doesn't work like that. There's so much cheating and extortion going on that only the big players can survive in the station's brutal property market. The best the crew can hope for is to buy an old corvette and start out as an independent, but Harry forbid that. So the crew spends their money in the only remaining way they can: pleasure."

The doctor looked away in disgust. "Are you going to follow the crew in their example? After all, with your obscene paycheck of like what, a million credits, you can probably hire out the entire brothel and turn it into your private mansion."

"An enticing notion, but I'm afraid my libido isn't what it used to be." The professor gestured at the medical equipment in the lab. "My pleasure runs differently. I think I'm going to spend it all to turn my quarters into my own private lab. Just because I'm the third-in-command doesn't mean I'm neglecting my academic duties. The entire ship is a treasure trove of research. , If you're interested, you can even join in my studies of all the blood runes he's painted. There must be some inherent energy source that is powering all those metaphysical results. If we can crack the secret, we can advance our society to a higher level. Would you like to be a part in that?"

"I'm interested." She admitted. "But not in the way you are. I'm not so hungry on academic recognition. I don't need to know how the universe is put together. I just.. I just want.."

Selner turned towards the glowing flesh-knitting fluids, put under different contained environments to measure the effects. Of all the medicines she had worked with before, none were so amazing and so incredibly opaque as these 'magic' potions. She refused to believe the potions were powered with something as fantastical as magic. There had to be a better explanation. Some new technology, perhaps.

But would she sacrifice all her principles to pursue this grandest of mysteries? How far was too far?

"I want an end."

Harry sighed for the umpteenth time and tugged at his collar. "Not another party. This retarded neon-blinking suit is suffocating me."

"You look fine, Captain. Don't worry, everyone wears the same thing."

Following Arnaud's advice, Claris tried her best to elevate herself from being Harry's servant. Her muted blue dress and pearly black shawl revealed much less cleavage than before. Only a fair portion of her back was exposed, showing off the contours of her spine and shoulder blades. It would be a subtle enough enticement to gain Harry's attention without seeming too desperate.

"Wasn't this event an optional thing? Do I really have to attend this boring dinner?"

"Harry, you don't understand. Being invited into the Excelsior Club is a privilege. Only pirates who command larger ships or small fleets are ever invited. Hargrave made many connections here. These rival pirate captains might resent your disposal of him. You have to let your fellow captains to know you better to allay their suspicions. Besides, some of them might know a contact who can give out a high-paying job. This is all part of a regular pirate captain's duty."

The wizard would have preferred leaving a message, but alas, in the game of politics, you had to show commitment. "If you say so."

Their chauffeured hovercar finally arrived at some tower located in the north ward of Trindebal Station, where all the other posh establishments were situated. After leaving a hefty tip for the driver, the pair disembarked and climbed the carpeted stairway to the imposing mansion-like entrance. Guards equipped in the same hypermodern armor of blue as back on Vlessing verified each guest's identity and equipment. No firearms were allowed inside. Curiously though, knives and collapsible crossbows were allowed inside. How peculiar.

A uniformed servant with a much more friendlier bearing than the guards called them up the checkpoint. "Invitation and ID chits please."

After the old butler-like servant passed the cubes through a machine, he handed them back to Claris before turning to address the newcomer.

"I bid you welcome to the Excelsior Club. Please enjoy your stay, Captain Harry."

"Thanks."

To Harry's relief, the interior of the mansion-tower was nothing as extreme as Dolohov's little fantasy castle. While the style is undoubtedly modern, it also harkened back to an earlier age, one of refinement and sophistication. Warm colors, soft exoplanetary furs and an occasional touch of shipboard architecture dominated this classy establishment. A banker from London or New York would fit right home in this luxurious environment.

A gaggle of people were socializing in the reception lounge where all the guests were ferried into. About forty or so captains of different ethnicities and different genders all swapped their latest stories or exchanged new pieces of gossip. One steely grandmother type – the equal of Thatcher, Harry was sure – was boasting how her asteroid pirate base was earning her a billion credits in revenue each standard year. Just the casual mention of that gigantic amount stunned the boy for a moment. The boy was very conscious of himself now. He might be a shark in the domain of his own ship, but in this club he was amongst killer whales.

"It's not so bad, Harry." Claris whispered softly to him. "There are only a handful of fleet captains here. The rest only captain a single larger ship or a few small corvettes."

They walked amongst the crowd, trying to mingle in, before a very imposing lady barged in between them. "My oh my, the newcomer has finally arrived!"

The woman was blonde, tall, and very heavyset. Despite that, her bearing was one of high stature. All eyes followed her movement in the crowd, knowing her opinions to be of great importance.

Putting on his best fake smile, he bowed slightly before the approaching lady. "A pleasure to meet you milady. May I have the honor to know your name?"

The big woman giggled. "What a lovely accent you have, my dear Harry. As for little old me, you may call me Madame Green. I am the official hostess for the Excelsior Club for this fine eve. It's my job to make you feel right at home amongst our valued guests. If you have any request, don't hesitate to ask. I'm always available for a young munchkin like you, captain. Ta-ta."

The whole of a woman lumbered off to approach another guest. Harry turned towards his escort, eyebrows raised.

"Madame Green is the third daughter of Admiral Black, who heads the Callistoan Maffia."

"Oh." Well that explained it. With all the weirdness going on since his awakening, this wasn't much of a surprise.

The pair went on to introduce themselves to the other captains and their escorts. These were the rising stars in the pirate business. Some acted like they were purebloods. Others looked like they just dragged themselves from Knockturn Alley. No two person was the same. One was a bored son of a corporate executive, another was a prostitute who married herself in the business. All had either made it this far due to luck, skill, or privilege. Their success stories were as varied as the blinking lights on Harry's costume.

The only thing the pirate captains had in common were their eyes. They all hawked at Harry like they were predators.

End Notes: I actually feel like writing another fanfic now. This fic is nice and all, but it's like writing The Songs of the Fox all over again – people either love or hate my fic. There's no in between.

Spare Change

One would think that criminals do not work together as a rule. Why should they? Their very nature suggests that they are untrustworthy at best, and highly opportunistic most of the time. It is not a far stretch to imagine another criminal would be at least as worst. Collaborations are bound only by trust and mutual benefit. Often times, individual gain trumps such deep friendships, allowing for some rather unpleasant betrayals to occur. Contracts are as good as useless for people who constantly break the law every day. One could shoot another without any repercussion and take the spoils for himself.

Still, in practice, even the most violent pirates restrained themselves. They already have enough enemies – there was no need to attract more from the people who they share common enemies with. Second, some measure of a honor code is still present amongst fellow pirates. Plunder, murder and rape is all acceptable, but betraying another pirate will put you in bad blood. It might sound hypocritical, but there is both an honorable and a dishonorable way to get rid of a fellow pirate. Take the dishonorable option, and you will find that even pirate stations will reject your presence.

For in the end, the craft of intrasolar piracy is a complex one, requiring both a significant amount of infrastructure and manpower to sustain. Without new recruits, a captain would eventually run out of crew. Without a repair yard, a ship would fall apart. Without a brokerage network, a pirate would have no way of selling their plunder. Piracy is a modern industry like any other, one interconnected to the solar industry. Its field is filled with many independents, but large chunks are dominated by a handful of powerful groups.

A few representatives of those giants were present here this eve at the Excelsior Club, of which the most poignant one was Madame Green, a principal member of the Callistoan Maffia. The crime conglomerate's possession of the largest pirate space station in the immensely populated Jupiter sector made it the most successful crime group in the solar system. Its military forces could even challenge some of the smaller lunar colonies, while its defenses ensured that no major government would dare strike at its heart.

Such was the wealth of the Callistoan Maffia that it maintained its own Gravitic Catapult. It was for this reason alone that Harry needed to ingratiate himself with Madame Green. Sadly, his meager attempts at approaching the bombastically heavy woman proved less than effective. As soon as the novelty of his daring raid on the Orion Constellations wore off, the regal woman shifted her attention elsewhere.

"Oh, I would love to talk to you, but I have not seen Captain Gramonde in a year, so toodles!"

The minor snub was an uncomfortable reminder that he was at the bottom of the food chain at this gathering. People not much older than him have accomplished ten times as much, and those who were old enough to be his parents were certainly out of his league. No matter how clownish or charming the pirates may act on the outside, their inner soul would always be that of a ruthless killer. To walk amongst these predators required one to be familiar with the movements of their dance.

Harry, who hated the high life since the Ministry first began to mistreat him, felt very much out of depth. It took all of Claris' guidance to keep him from blundering. When the progression moved into some sort of ballroom dance, it took all of her considerable patience to teach Harry not to step on her toes.

It was a good thing the dance was sort of related to the waltz, which the wizard had at least rudimentary familiarity with. All he really needed to learn was how to match his steps with the colored symbols flickering on his partner's clothes. He kind of felt he was playing some bastardized version of Dance Dance Revolution.

All went well for the past five minutes. Then, all the people's clothes flashed white.

"Wha—?"

Claris put her finger on Harry's lips. "Switch partners. No time to explain. Just let your partner lead and she'll do the rest."

And she was gone before he knew it. While he had the faint fear of being left unpicked, a tall woman wearing a military-esque uniform snatched his hand and forcefully brought his body close to hers.

His partner's stern face indicated that she was doing anything but enjoying the dance. Her movements were stiff and wooden, forcing Harry's helpless body to be dragged along. It was as if she never intended Harry to take the lead in the first place, which was a bit of a blow to his pride as a man.

"May I have the pleasure of -ugh-, knowing your name?"

Despite the woman's forceful countenance, she was hitting all the right steps in tune with their costume's flashing symbols. Harry only wished she would let him catch up.

"Gloria. Of the Mirrored Abyss."

"Nice to meet you, I'm—"

"—Harry of the Eviscerator."

"Looks like you're already acquainted with me." He raised his eyebrows and tried not to show he was struggling to catch up with the steps. "Do we have any business?"

The female pirate grinned in a particularly vicious way. Before he could even ask, her hand left the place across his shoulder, using it to swiftly grasp her fist around Harry's balls.

"You are weak." She intoned as she squeezed hard, earning a small yelp from Harry. Strangely enough, the intimate touch also roused his erection. "But yet you defeated Captain Hargrave. You could not have done it alone. Tell me who arranged his death."

"I'm nobody's puppet. It was all me."

The fierce woman stared into Harry's green eyes for several seconds. Her grin slowly faded away, as if she saw something she didn't like. "You lie. I see no conviction, no willpower. You are a bug. A pest that needs to be squashed."

His balls were put under pressure again, but this time it seemed Gloria had no intention of easing her killer grip. Harry's shock made way to fear. What if this crazy bitch would actually go through with her insane plan? Would he live out the rest of his life as a eunuch?

'Damnit! I've faced tougher opponents.'

Anger flared into his mind as he suddenly took charge. Why was he getting all willy-nilly around a bunch of low life criminals? He took down a Dark Lord, killed countless of dark practitioners, fought against the entire Wizarding World and eventually brought it to its knees. This arrogant bitch couldn't hope to match his achievements.

The ball-squeezing woman barely had any warning of Harry's changing mood. One moment Gloria was all set to crush the boy's balls in a pulp. In the next, her victim somehow managed to shock her wrist with a hidden electrical weapon that overloaded her suit's protective measures, forcing her to release her hold. The attack made her lose her composure for a moment, but Harry clumsily picked up the dance and shoved her body against his own. His erection brushed her crotch, sending an uncomfortable chill over her body. Harry exploited the woman's paralysis by wrapping his hand around her back and slowly pressing it downwards. Eventually, his palm slipped through her dress pants and caressed her skin directly.

"You're not the only one who can play this game, bitch." Harry growled in Gloria's ear, and bit the ear lobe hard, drawing blood. "The question is, will you back off?"

Gloria tried to squirm out of his hold without making a scene. Her strength was formidable. If she wasn't run through a couple of thousands of volts, she would have been able to smack Harry down with ease.

His hand crept down her bare butt in hidden view until his index finger managed to caress her puckered anus. That brought the fiery woman's resistance to a screeching halt. This time it was Harry's job to make sure they wouldn't look out of place, although a few perceptive captains were surely suspecting.

"You.. you wouldn't dare." The female captain warned feebly, trying hard not to succumb to Harry's gentle teasing of her twitching rosebud. "I'll cut off your balls and stuff them inside your asshole, you sick freak."

Smirking, Harry's tongue glided along Gloria's jaw line, earning a small shudder of revulsion from her as his finger began to spread

out her tight opening. "For a woman who fondles other men's balls for fun, that's a pretty funny statement."

Unknown to his victim, Harry's tongue trailed her cheek in such a way as to draw the blood from her ear wound into a small set of runes. The signs would be sloppy and not that effective, but the spell was simple and the tiny amount of power released would be more than enough for what he planned.

"I think you need a lesson on who you're dealing with." The wizard said ominously as he enacted his spell.

Without any warning, he shoved his finger deep inside Gloria's anus and unleashed his magic. Tiny shivers of shocks rent over his finger, sending non-lethal but certainly excruciating levels of shock through her intestines and the rest of her organs. The shock and Harry's continued aggression was enough to send the alpha woman over her edge. Her shivering body pressed harshly against Harry's chest, delighting him with the contours of her breasts. Her suit pants also started to soak in the liquids she was letting out. Harry's covered cock tasted the moisture in growing anticipation.

Eventually, the woman just collapsed on Harry's shoulder, exhausted and defeated. Harry grinned as he waltzingly led her away from the middle of the dance room and towards one of the open balconies. The air outside was cold, and the station's light were purposely dimmed in order to portray the illusion of night time. Many other inner structures dotted the skyline, providing everyone up high a breathtaking view.

Not that Harry cared. He ripped his finger from Gloria's hole and turned her slack body around, letting her bend over the thick marble balcony rails. His hands lovingly groped and slapped Gloria's luscious ass globes. Facing little resistance, he pulled down her pants and her panties and brushed his fingers over her moist lips.

"You act all stiff and mighty, but you're really nothing but a whore who needs to learn her place."

His hands left the woman's butt, but only to unzip his own pants. His rapidly pulsing erection was laid bare in the pseudo night. With cruel eagerness he brushed his shaft against her leaking snatch, coating it with her fluids. He made sure to bend his tip upwards so as to

tingle her clit. From the shaky movements she was trying to make, it looked like she was coming around. Her head turned, revealing the hatred filled in her eyes.

He slapped her ass as hard as he could, jolting the woman out of her killer mood. "There's no need to give me that look. It's bad for business, you know?"

"Fuck you..."

"I'd love to, but I can't. So I'll take this inviting hole of yours instead.." He put his hands firmly on Gloria's ass cheeks and spread them roughly apart. Withdrawing his glistening cock from under the folds of her pussy, he angled the tip towards her tight pink entrance.

Harry gave the woman one last chance to redeem herself. "Will you apologize?"

"Go to hell!"

"Suit yourself." And with great relish he slammed his cock right through her opening and straight into her bowels. The pressure was enormous, and the lack of lubrication made it almost as painful for him as for her.

Almost was the key word. The earth-shattering shriek she let out was sure to penetrate the closed balcony doors and back inside the ballroom. Harry didn't care. If someone really objected to his actions, he would have been taken away by the guards already.

With agonizing slowness, he pulled back his hip until his cock ridge was at the ring of her anus. He teasingly pushed the ridge in and out, enjoying the painful murmurs of his formidable opponent. To see her reduced to sobs and helpless cries was an enormous turn-on for Harry. How he missed destroying women. Especially those who wanted to harm him.

After applying a gracious amount of spit and vaginal fluids to his erection, he proceeded to ass rape Gloria as hard as he could. The loud grunts and cries she let out were music to his ears and only encouraged Harry to fuck her more brutally. He slapped her ass until it was red, pulled her hair to add to the pain, and squeezed her wind pipe when she became a little too loud in her screams.

Somewhere along the rape, she regained enough control over her limbs to draw out a hidden knife.

"Oh no you won't." Harry warned as he snatched the blade away from Gloria's weak grip. He bashed her head with the pommel before throwing the weapon over the balcony. "No cheating."

"P-Please... let me go.."

For several minutes, he continued to fuck the dark-haired lady into a stupor. He would go hard and fast, then slow and deep, then pause to jerk his hips around to see if she would grunt more in pain. Despite the violation, Gloria's cunt continued to leak like an open tap. Harry eagerly used it to smear his cock wet, slowly lubricating the insides of her ass until the fucking became acceptably enjoyable for him.

"What kind of a bitch would enjoy being raped in the ass except for a slut? Just admit that you're a whore who needs to be fucked every day."

Gloria couldn't even articulate her words enough to respond. The only sounds leaving her breathless throat were grunts and cries that added to the wet slopping sound of his hips smacking against her butt. Harry slowed down his pace to lean over and mash his hands against the woman's covered breasts, kneading them and squeezing them like they were bread dough. He pushed his cock deep inside her channel as he molested her with his hands, grasping her tightly in order to enjoy his possession over her body.

"God your ass is tight. Beats jerking off by myself." The sheer amount of stimulation that Harry received was actually a bit overwhelming after a millennia of nothing, except for that blowjob that is. "But don't kid yourself. You're not good enough to become my concubine."

His eruption was nearing soon. Harry abandoned bruising her breasts, instead he lifted her off the balcony and made her kneel down on the cold marble floor on all fours. Gripping her hips, he brutally slammed his cock in and out of her anus in order to reach his peak soon. As he pumped in and out of her asshole like a jackhammer out of control, Gloria's cunt started to squirt in spasms,

drenching her pants along with Harry's own pair. Both their clothing's electrical illuminators blinked out in synchronization, beating with the beat of Harry's thrusts.

Harry leaned over and roughly pulled Gloria's hair in order to see her face. Her erratic eyes were consumed in the overload of pain and climax she was suffering under. All signs of anger or rational thought had disappeared.

"Look at you. You're nothing but a bitch being fucked like the dirty dog you are. I can't believe you're cumming from having your ass reamed. You really are a whore."

She didn't respond at all, even when Harry leaned in and sucked at her lolling tongue with his lips. He kissed her neck and took in her faint perfume. Like a dog he bit into her neck, drawing indentations that would not fade for a while. The intoxicating experience was coming to a close however. Harry leaned back from her lowered body and increased his vigor, trying to reach the state he had been yearning so long.

"Fuck.. I'm.. cumming!"

He made a final slam into her ass and shot out globs of white directly in her bowels. His back arched back as he silently howled the ecstasy he was channeling from his release. His hands gripped the sides of her waist so hard that his nails raked her skin, drawing blood. Gloria was in a similar state of climax, pushing out a hoarse cry from her throat as her entire body shuddered under the sensory bombardment.

Eventually, they both collapsed on the ground in sheer exhaustion. Harry took in the waves of bliss that radiated from Gloria's warm, soiled body. The woman herself was still dealing with the aftereffects of the climax, along with the semen pumped into her body.

With a mighty grunt Harry retracted his pelvis, releasing his shrinking dick from its comfortable confines. Globs of cum, ass juice and other nasty bits spurted out in bits after his exit. The anal ring had difficulty closing up after being stretched out so long and so brutally.

Uncaring, Harry grasped Gloria's collar and pulled her painfully up to his waist. He rubbed her dazed face into his dirty crotch, cleaning it with her cheeks and lips like her face was just a bath towel. His entire scent embedded in her skin. She would be sure to remember it, Harry thought as he chuckled darkly. The satisfied boy used the strands of his victim's hair to brush out the remaining gunk then looked at her empty eyes. He spat on it, adding yet another fluid to the collection smeared on her face.

Finally he released her lifeless body, smacking her body back on the cold and uncaring floor. He zipped his own pants up and wiped his hands as best as he could. Looking down on the violated captain, he could think about nothing else than the satisfaction he received when he put this ball-crushing bitch back to her rightful place. Just because she was part of the Excelsior Club didn't mean that she had the right to abuse his balls. The entire sight of her prone, sweat-soaked body with her pants lowered down to reveal her cum-drenched ass was invigorating. The entire experience had fully returned Harry's confidence.

Smirking with the satisfaction that only came after a good fuck, the boy absently retrieved a few credits worth of cubes from his pocket. It wasn't that much, just enough to pay for a candy bar. He threw them over her ravaged body, soaking its plastic cover with his cum and her sweat.

"Keep the change."

And with that, he turned back inside to freshen himself up at the men's room. As he passed through the crowd of dancers, no one came to kick him out, so that was a good sign at least. Despite its refined image, the club was still a den of thieves, murderers and rapists.

Harry felt right at home.

Recruitment was rather more difficult than Cleveland had imagined. As a former grunt, he was never really accustomed to handling the more administrative duties. All he ever needed to do was follow orders and shoot people dead. The paperwork that came after was usually taken care of by Chief Gerchev. Since Cleveland became

the Chief of Security (solely by the fact that he was one of the surviving boarders), he was finding the task considerably frustrating.

Luckily, Janis had considerably more experience in these matters. Her help was invaluable in setting up the office down in the outer hub and putting up recruitment ads on the personnelnet.

The Eviscerator was never crewed to its maximum capacity. The low risks that Captain Hargrave undertook meant that combat losses were fairly rare, and only amongst the pirate marines. Thus there was no need to crew the ship beyond the minimum that was required to run the ship by spec. Even Hargrave's sluggishness in filling up the two empty hangar slots indicated the lack of urgency. More fighters meant more hangar crew. More hangar crew meant more maintenance costs.

But under this new, risk-taking captain, the current crew levels were wholly inadequate. With no redundancies, a single incident might take out a specialist that was absolutely essential in a complicated process such as reactor operation or thruster maintenance. The distances involved in interplanetary trade and piracy meant that ships had to be away from civilization for as much as several weeks. If the ship fell into some sort of emergency, there was no one around to help them out. Only they themselves could solve their own problems.

As a former semi-military police carrier, the Evie was well equipped to hold up to thrice the minimum amount of crew Hargrave employed. While having over a hundred crew on the captain's payroll would severely diminish everyone's share, the flexibility they would gain would make up for it. First, they would be three times harder to board, and had more crew on hand to board other ships. Second, any losses they would sustain would not deteriorate the performance of the ship by a lot until all the specialists in that field were dead. Lastly, more crew meant less fatigue in running multiple jobs in succession, allowing them to earn more credits in less time.

The door snapped open, pushing Cleveland back to the present.

"Heya, is this the place to apply for a job on the Eviscerator?"

Cleveland nodded and gestured the sailor inside the spartan office. The new entrant plopped down the offered seat like a sack of

potatoes and leaned back on his chair like he owned the place. "So what's first, buddy?"

Frowning slightly, Cleveland wanted to give the man a piece of his mind, but Janis quickly shook her head behind the man's back. Most pirates didn't have very good manners, and most captains couldn't care any less. Captain Hargrave was one of the few exceptions.

"Let us start with your credentials, Mr..."

"Dirk."

"Mr. Dirk, then. Did the Trindebal employment office issue any certificates for you?"

"Ya, I got 'em right here." His hand reached into his pocket and retrieved a beer-stained pair of hardened sheets. He threw them down the desk like a Frisbee. "It's genuine, I swear."

"Hmm.." The chief took the time to examine the documents. "It says in your most recent appointments that you had three years of hangar deck duty. Then, you got snatched up by Captain Yerlin to become a... deckswabber?"

The rough-faced man simply shrugged. "Cap'n Yerlin calls anyone whose job is to supervise the deck when the chief's not there as a deckswabber. It means that I bash people's heads together and swab the deck clean with their limp bodies. Get it?"

Shuddering slightly, Cleveland returned the sheets and questioned the seemingly half-drunken man about his skills, behavior, and other stories about his previous employments. The man was such a mess that the chief wanted this interview to be over with as soon as possible.

"We'll take your offer under consideration. Please wait until tomorrow to hear whether you will be invited back. Thank you for your time."

"Anytime, buddy, anytime." The man rose from his seat and lumbered towards the exit. Then, he stopped in his tracks and turned around, his face full of curiosity. "Oh, by the way, I heard something really freaky from the dock rats repairing your ship. Says

your captain's a real crazy sunovabitch who likes smearing blood over the walls and under everyone's bunks and shit."

"Our captain can be a little... eccentric. It is why he also demands permanent employment. Once you're in, you're in. You can try to get out, but it won't work."

Dirk just smiled stupidly at the explanation, as if he was thinking about more beer instead of the topic at hand. "Yah.. whatever.. it's not any different from joining the Callistoans or anything. I can handle that, especially with the salary and share you're offering. Man, my mates have to be crazy to pass on a job on your ship. Sweet money you guys are earning. Heard about you guys all day at the whorehouses. Anyway, see ya tomorrow, I gotta catch up with some bottles."

As Dirk left the office, Cleveland leaned forward and smacked his head against his desk. This was the sixth time this had happened. Only the really crazy or incompetent spacers bothered to apply for a position on the Eviscerator. Even amongst the most clueless of spacers, word of Captain Harry's insanities and draconian punishments had already leaked out. While the pay package that he offered was certainly attractive compared to the bread crumbs other captains occasionally threw away, the fact that this was essentially a lifetime contract didn't endear very much to the independent-minded pirates.

There was no other choice though. Harry's secrets were too much to ever risk leaking out. Everyone accepted into the ship would have to bear the same Mark that marred Cleveland's own arm. At least Harry wasn't deceiving those who showed interest with false promises. Though the chief himself was dealing with the new situation particularly well, he knew of some of Hargrave's old loyalists still resented being under Harry's thumb. What Harry and the Evie needed were fresh blood in order to diminish the share of unwilling crew. With only a tiny minority, the group of dissenters would fade away into nothing eventually.

From the lazy dregs and scruffy scoundrels that had entered so far, Cleveland wasn't feeling very hopeful he would meet Harry's recruitment target.

The door opened again, and this time the Chief of Security did take note. The black-robed figure covered as much of his body as he could, leaving nothing that could even hint at his identity. The man took a quick glance around the entire room and scanned anything that would pose a threat to him, before seating himself on the chair without another word.

Somehow, the entire bearing of this man managed to overshadow Harry's own impressive aura of fear.

"Uhm.. Welcome to our recruiting office. Are you here to apply for a position on the Eviscerator?"

The man nodded minutely, and did nothing else. Cleveland let the silence linger uncomfortably for a moment before asking his credentials. The man retrieved the sheets and slapped them lightly on the desk, then pushing them forward like he was handling a game piece. Wary of any traps, the recruiter took one good look at the innocent pieces of holoplastic before picking them up.

All the information was in illegible code.

"Can you tell me more about yourself? Like, your name and your desired position on the crew?"

The applicant curved his lips into a smile. "My name is Ether. I have been sent here."

"Oh? Sent by whom?"

The thickly clothed man leaned back and pressed the tips of his fingers together. His smile widened into a smirk as he noticed Cleveland's increasing discomfort.

"Tell your Captain Harry that I bear a message, and a gift from the one he knows as Star."

After using his expensive pants' self-cleaning function along with a further application of Scourgify, Harry left the toilet stall and went over to the sinks to wash away the remaining muck. Women's faces just didn't make for good cleaning tissue.

Another toilet flushed. The stall opened up to let out a cheerful looking man who looked to be in his thirties. The fellow captain strolled over to the sink next to Harry and began to wash his hands.

"Good show you put for us out there, kid."

Harry raised his eyebrow. That comment was remarkably.. laid-back. "You're not bothered?"

"Nah." The man huffed. "Captain Gloria does the ball-crushing routine to every man who enters the club for the first time. Even I didn't escape her gentle handling. The bitch had it coming, I'm sure." He chuckled for a moment. "I just don't want to be in your shoes when she finally comes after you. She's a bit of a psychopath, you see. Her ship is an especially nasty piece of work."

"I've dealt with worse."

Finishing with his wash, Harry dried his hands with the recyclable towels.

The man followed after him. "That's the spirit. I like you already kid." He offered his hand. "I'm Captain Zymen of the Swift Corsair."

At least the limb was clean. Harry took it and shook it firmly. "You already know who I am, it seems."

"That's right."

They chatted a bit about themselves and their ships as they made their way to the dining hall. Curiously, the Swift Corsair was also a mobile carrier, but of a different make and design. She carried six birds instead of four like the Evie, but lacked a torpedo mount in return. The Corsair was also a bit faster than the Eviscerator, but paid for it with a layer of armor.

After a minute of small chat they finally arrived at the sumptuous dining room. A single and absurdly long dining table sat in the middle of the room.

"Captain Harry." Claris greeted her captain flatly. "You took your time. Dinner has already begun without you."

"No matter." Harry remarked as he sat down on the seat next to her.

Zymen took the seat next to him and dug in eagerly on the lobster-like arrangement before him. "So Harry, I heard from someone who heard from someone that you're in the market for a big job."

The boy's ears perked up at that comment. Perhaps that's why the man was so eager to engage him in conversation. "You're offering me that job?"

"Something like that." The man paused in his chewing and dipped his lips with a napkin. "Word has come by to me that a certain passenger liner carrying a diplomatic mission from Io will be departing in the very near future. The diplomats' objectives are to sign a non-aggression pact with Europa and pave the way for other cooperation. I've been.. well, scoped out by a few interested parties in making sure those delegations never arrive at their destination."

"Wouldn't such an important deal between two of Jupiter's great powers be well-guarded?" Claris interjected, seeing the flaws before Harry realized them himself. "Any attacker would face at least a flotilla of destroyers."

"Ah, but you see, my dear, this liner won't carry such an obvious escort. The risk of an overwhelming attack by Ganymede and Callisto is too great if the convoy's route is known. The loans will be taking the covert options, sending sixteen different 15000-seat passenger liners along eight different routes at different times. Fifteen of them will be decoys, of course. The real one carrying the diplomatic and industrial delegations is still a bit of a mystery until the actual launch. In any case, my clients are fairly confident that they will find out soon enough which ship to strike."

"And what if your client is too late?" Harry asked. He wasn't looking forward to wasting his time. "How can we be sure he actually knows the right answer at all?"

"To ensure our cooperation, he'll pay a quarter of the bounty upfront, with the rest advanced to our accounts after we have successfully dealt with the ship we are assigned to stop. It doesn't matter if it's a decoy in the end – that's all in the contract agreement."

"..How much credits are we talking about?"

"Two hundred million for the diplomatic delegation, Fifty million for the industrial delegation. If our target turns to be just a decoy, we only get paid a hundred and fifty mil."

"That much?" Harry widened his eyes. "Just to kill a bunch of officials?"

The older captain couldn't restrain his laugh. "Trillions of credits are at stake in mining rights and other business opportunities. I'm sure whoever's money we're lining our pockets with have sent some other pirates to take care of the decoys with similar rewards. To all these bigwigs, a couple of billion credits is just spare change. Most conglomerates earn several million creds per second."

"But then... how do we know that our target is the real one? How are you sure the client will tell us the truth?"

"Don't worry, I asked them that myself. Our party is going to be the most heavily-armed one." Zymen smirked. "Regardless whether we nab the real people or not, as long as the two loan delegations don't arrive, the money is ours. That means if the other pirates are doing their jobs in eliminating the other liners, we all get our chump change. So it's really in our best interests to work together."

Harry frowned, not entirely understanding the deal. "If you're being sent after just one liner, why do you need to take me along with you?"

"Two reasons." The man answered readily. "First, if this is truly the genuine target and not a decoy, then we will likely face some sort of surprise to discourage at least a pair of corvettes. Small pirates attacks are sadly all too common. Many of the developed lunar colonies have therefore been developing the habit of protecting their important assets with many hidden defenses or other unpleasant surprises. I would guess in our case that we would likely face a couple of escorts, perhaps a whole squadron, disguised as transports or other liners to keep with the facade. A bit too formidable for a pair of mobile carriers, but I've got some other pals who might be willing to pitch in. The payout isn't high for nothing, you know. Don't worry, I'll not include too many people, so your share will be substantial."

Clariss followed up on that comment. "Will every partner get an equal share, or will it be divided by contribution or tonnage?"

"Tonnage. It's the fairest. If you just sit back and do absolutely nothing, you won't get a share, but that's obvious. Just keep in mind that our two ships will likely be one of the smaller players."

"I'm not doing anything less than forty mil." Harry responded firmly. He was confident he might be able to find other deals which would payout that amount. "As long as my share is equal or higher, I'm in, provided I can get more details on this job of yours soon."

"Deal." They both shook their hands.

After that, they both went back to their meal. They were on their fourth dish now, some jellified squid that looked absolutely rancid to the wizard.

"One more question." Harry said as another stray thought entered his mind. "Why did you ask me in the first place? We don't know each other."

"Your actions speak louder than your words. What you did to the Orion Constellations tells me you're not afraid of taking risks, and what you inflicted on Captain Gloria was nothing less than masterful. We need a heartless, immoral bastard like you. While I might know a few other captains, they're not.. how you would say, doing the 'dirty' jobs anymore. They think they've grown past the unpleasant side of piracy. Feh, the snobs."

"What do you mean by 'dirty jobs'?"

"Oh, we're not just going to blow up that fifteen-thousand seat liner and be done with it. There's always a market for everything. You'd be crazy to throw away all that potential merchandise."

"You mean..."

"Indebted servitude, eternal thralldom, lifelong vassalage, permanent contracting, whatever you want to call it. To us, it's simply slavery. It's a very profitable business, I can assure you. With the high-quality passengers on that ship, we can sell the prettyheads to the brothels, the eggheads to the crime conglomerates, the

muscleheads to the mines, and dump the rest for human experimentation or some other whacky stuff that you don't want to find out. On top of that, there's probably some really classy people on that ship that would earn millions in ransom. We can easily make ten mil out of the liner alone, perhaps twenty mil if we're lucky with the ransom negotiation. So are you still in? I'll let you have first pick of the prettiest one. I already got plenty of slaves in my private pen."

Refuse a job that involved teaming up with a bunch of unstable pirates with no qualms about abusing, enslaving, and dooming to death a couple of thousand of innocent people for just a few extra million credits?

"Heck yeah I'm in."

End Notes: I recently read a SpaceBattles forum topic that discussed a certain published author's works. One of the questions that popped up was whether the content of his writing reflected his opinions. Say, whether an author who persistently features monarchies in a positive light is actually in favor of (absolute) monarchies in real life. This deceptively simple formulated question can erupt a torrent of differing opinions. I'd like to think an author's real opinions and the perceived slants in his works are unrelated, at least at face value. Sometimes it is obvious that a work's prevailing moral is the actual message the author is trying to pass on. A good example would be George Orwell's Nineteen-Eighty-Four. At other times, the work is clearly disturbing in nature and should without any further explanation be regarded as something wrong. Just visit the horror section in your local bookstore for examples. Sometimes people see things in a particular phrase or plot element that doesn't have any meaning intended at all. In such ambiguous layers of meaning upon non-meaning, the simplest solution is to step back and enjoy the read on a less critical level.

In the end, why people would even want to read, let alone write an immoral work of fiction is also a complex question that has many complex answers. However, the simplest one is because we secretly enjoy such guilty pleasures. That doesn't mean we endorse them in our daily lives. I mean, if yaoi fangirls can get away with Harry/Voldemort and Mpreg, guys should be allowed to write their own fanciful thoughts.

Venus and Mars

The mobile carrier class enjoyed a rich history amongst space faring nations. Developed just after the First Terran-Martian War, the Highwayman-class mobile carrier provided the mainstay of Mars' power projection in the more distant perimeters of its sphere of influence. With its high reactor capacity, admirable recycling efficiency and abundant fuel reserves, the class was rated to operate independently to up to four years. Its small complement of fighters was enough to deal with any enemy commercial interests, while the ship itself could serve as a gun platform if there were more serious threats to contend with. Its small size and relatively low sophistication also allowed it to be produced en masse. Over time, the mobile carrier solidified itself as a cheap and versatile class that performed remarkably well in policing and raiding duties.

Its drawback was that for a ship the size of a frigate, it could never really stand up to one itself. While mobile carriers were built to suppress, frigates were built for battle. The dedicated warships lacked a hangar bay to project their power over a long distance, but anything in the range of their multiple Class VII guns can be quickly pounded into slag. Frigates also usually carried several military missile mounts, providing even more flexibility in direct damage that a mobile carrier couldn't boast. There was no contest, usually. The only redeeming chance a mobile carrier might overcome a frigate was that if it carried a bomber.

Like the one currently resting inside the Eviscerator's hangar bay.

"What is this?" Harry asked as he entered the recently repaired hangar bay together with Claris. "I didn't recall ordering a new fighter."

The sleek shape of the black low-profile bomber obscured its lethal purpose. Bombers were usually designed according two separate philosophies: as ordinance carriers or as armor penetrators. In the former, bombers were usually decked out in thick layers of armor and carried a high amount of missiles. They were sluggish and would be hopeless against fighters, but could withstand point defense fire long enough to deliver their high explosive payload from a comfortable distance. In the latter case, bombers relied on speed and stealth instead of mass, carrying only relatively few amount of ordinance in order to retain their superior acceleration. They were all

about hit-and-run attacks and needed to close in on their target at a very high speed to guide their kinetic bombs along the right trajectory.

One of these type of bombers was sitting in front of him right now, along with its pilot. The man, who was dressed conspicuously in black, was instantly notable for his eerie smile at Harry's entrance. It looked like he didn't even mind being handcuffed or that two of Cleveland's security goons were keeping him targeted with their beam rifles.

Annoyed, Harry repeated his question.

"That," The stranger jerked his head. "Is a MarsMil manufactured Boshan-class accelerant bomber. It's the latest iteration of one of Mars' best military strike craft."

"And this thing is in my hangar bay because..?"

"A present from Star."

Harry stood silent for a moment, considering the man's words. There had to be a meaning to all of this. "Alright. Let's head to somewhere private."

The captain, Claris and the stranger all moved to a nearby office room. Harry ordered the handcuffs removed and dismissed the guard, seeing no serious risk in letting the man have some breathing room. If he tried anything funny, Harry and Claris both had their sidearms ready to intervene.

"So let's start with the beginning. Who are you, and why did Star send you here?"

"You may call me Ether. As for Star, she has been very satisfied with your performance, and wishes to employ you in a more regular capacity."

That didn't sound very reassuring to the captain.

"I don't work for anyone." Harry responded firmly. "I'm an independent, and I don't plan to stick around this region of space for long."

"You.. misunderstand. Star does not expect you to work in her retainer. We merely require you to do some jobs once in a while at any location you happen to be in. Our influence reaches every colony, so you will never be out of jobs. It is your choice whether you accept them or not, but the rewards are great if you choose to do so." Ether pulled the pair of encoded sheets from his pockets and put it in front of Harry. "Contained in these encrypted sheets is just a taste of what we can offer."

"So is your little bomber one of those rewards?"

"The bomber, along with myself, are gifts." The man smiled in vague amusement. "You are not required to provide any service for us both. The Boshan-class dive bomber is a very advanced craft that requires a specialized pilot to operate effectively. You won't find anyone else on this station who has experience with Mars-configured strike craft."

That should have sounded impressive, if Harry actually knew a thing or two about fighter craft. "I'm not really sure about you joining my crew. If you haven't already heard, I don't let any bum join my crew. I demand absolute obedience from each and every one of my crewmembers. I have a feeling that I can't trust you the same way I can trust my men."

As he continued to smile in his unnerving manner, Ether raised his hand in a dismissing wave. "There is nothing to fear from my presence. Upon your acceptance, my ties with Star and her associates will be severed irrevocably. My loyalty will be yours to command. You may do with me as you wish."

Somehow, Ether's reassurance didn't sound very authentic. While this Mars designed bomber might be a very valuable contribution to his arsenal, he didn't want to deal with the complication of a roguish and headstrong pilot in his retinue. Despite all of Ether's promises and reassurances, there was simply no way he could be reliable. The magical Mark might go a long way into forcing his silence, but Harry was all too aware that the compulsions behind the spell were flawed and weak. Its true effectiveness could only be achieved if the bearer of the Mark believed himself to be constrained by the Mark's powers. In fact, it was the bearer's belief in the strength of the Mark that gave the bindings their strength in the first place. The more the

victim is cowed, the more the Mark tightened its grip. With Ether's calm and confident composure, Harry was not quite sure he could break the man in. There was too much uncertainty on the limits of his deference.

"Let me be frank, Ether." The captain began after he finally weighed his options. "You haven't convinced me of your sincerity very much. You see, on my ship, I don't care whether my men are the best in their fields or not. I only require them to be loyal and obedient. You don't seem to fit that bill."

At least Ether dropped his incessant smile for once. He tried a little harder to convince Harry. "If my words will not satisfy you, maybe my deeds can be of use. Give me an order and I will fulfill it, whether it is an order to kill someone or provide all the information I know about Star."

A tempting offer. Harry wasn't sure how deep Ether's relationship with Star went, but from the sound of it the connection must have been substantial. That Ether was so ready in revealing his knowledge meant that there was something else behind his offer. It might be that Star trusted Harry with this knowledge and wanted to forge a deeper partnership with him. Or, Ether was just a pawn who was not even aware of his lowly status, and his offer is just meant to appease Harry's suspicious tendencies. There could be only one truth, and Harry didn't know which one to believe. However, there was just one additional factor in this equation that neither Ether or his boss hadn't considered.

Harry didn't care a fuck about Star, or the bomber for that matter.

"Very well then Ether. If you want me to test you, I'll test you alright." Harry then proceeded to lean back on his comfy chair and hauled his booted feet to the surface of the desk. He untied the laces and removed the articles from his feet. His socks followed quickly after, baring his feet in all its odorous glory.

"I've been having a very long day today walking around and meeting all kinds of salesmen and bureaucrats. I think my feet could use some refreshment."

Ether's cheerful face was mildly confused at the sight of Harry's bare soles. "My pardon?"

"It means," Harry said ominously. "That you are suppose to come to my side of the desk, kneel before me, take my smelly feet and lick it all clean and proper with that sharp tongue of yours."

The dark-clothed man stayed mute for a very long moment. His eyes never strayed from Harry's brazenly exposed limbs. Drops of sweat trickled down from Harry's toes. Eventually Ether finished his deliberation and broke his silence.

"The request is undignified. I would rather not comply to vulgar requests."

That didn't make the captain very happy. If Ether was unwilling to follow even the most trivial orders, then Harry didn't really command his total obedience. Even more galling was the fact that Ether himself defined the limits of his cooperation. Initiative was not what Harry was looking for in his crew.

The wizard's eyes kept staring into Ether's own prideful gaze as he issued his next command. "Claris. Will you please show my guest how things are done on my ship?"

The Second seemed not to comprehend, but then her eyes widened slightly as the actual meaning set in. With a rather nervous demeanor she went to kneel in front of Harry, took one of his open feet in her hands and slowly extended it towards her face.

As soon as her first lick trailed his sensitive heel, Harry fell into a trance . For some reason, the degrading nature of the act and Harry's obvious pleasure enthused his subordinate, encouraging her to expand her ministrations. She knead his knotted muscles with her supple palms and began to kiss his toes one by one, making sure that every kiss was wet. When she finally withdrew her mouth from his pinky toe, Claris went back to his larger toe and brushed the tip of her tongue under his toenail, eliciting a slight moan from the boy. The woman finally engulfed the toe completely within the cavity of her mouth. Her warm mouth sucked the digit long and hard. Her flexible tongue pampered it with gentle lashes.

It was like she was sucking his cock.

"You see, Mr. Ether." The boy said in a low, pleased voice as he held out his other foot to his servant to receive the same treatment. "Dignity has no place on my ship. When I said that I demanded obedience from my minions, I meant absolute obedience. You don't get to dictate which orders to ignore. You'll follow all of my orders or you'll follow none. Since you have proven to be incapable of holding my trust, you can just get the fuck out of my face. Take your friggin' bomber and encoded shit with you."

Only Claris' slurping sounds were audible in the room as Ether stood up to pick up his digitized sheets and silently make his way out of the office. Harry leaned further back in the chair and withdrew his slimy feet from Claris' sexy mouth, jerking it from Claris' firm grip.

"That's enough, Claris. Sorry about all that. I just needed to drive into Ether's thick skull that I have no need for big egos on my ship. Star's gift was more than a burden than a help to me. With all the plans I have in my mind, I don't have the time to watch Ether's moves. This was just the most convenient option to drive him away."

"Harry.. I don't mind. I can continue if you wish."

"No need." Harry waved her away as he withdrew a handkerchief to dry off his spit-polished feet. "I don't want to strain your opinion of me. You're a good and loyal servant, and you've done a good job running the ship for me so far. I would have been lost without you."

"But-"

"No buts." The boy stated firmly as he stood up and shifted his pants to accommodate his stiffened cock. Claris' performance had given him a massive hard-on that he needed to blow off quickly. "In any case, please ensure that both Ether and that overhyped bomber is gone from my ship by noon. I'll be relaxing in my quarters."

"Yes.. captain."

Claris continued to gaze at Harry's retreating form with more than a little longing, though tinges of revulsion stayed in her mind. Her captain was so strong and so terrifyingly dominant that he aroused much more than just her lust for power. The man in the form of a boy was slowly beginning to grow on her on a more deeper level.

Lately, the pirate lieutenant felt that their relationship had developed past the business of managing his ship.

Why did Harry affect her so much? It was so difficult to put into words. There was a measure of greatness in his personality. The captain was precise, absolute, and efficient. His actions were ruthless and unrestrained, but that only added to his prominence. Sometimes he could be so inhuman as to be incapable of love.

At other, more rarer times, he would shed his shell of outward indifference and leak out a sliver of affection. This gentler side of his was, perhaps, a remnant of his childhood, a period in his indiscernible past when he still knew some measure of piece.

In actuality, two different Harry's occupied the same body. One was dominant and put everything aside except for his own gain. The other was affectionate and had the capacity to care for others. Each Harry alone would have been unsuitable for Claris. The power-hungry side of Harry would use her up and discard her as soon as he found a more amusing toy. The caring Harry would become too passive and be eventually eliminated by his more unscrupulous rivals. Both were needed in order to make him strong but prevent him from becoming a monster. For better or worse, Claris needed to find a way to balance these two personalities out, or be destroyed in the backlash.

This would be a difficult challenge. It was clear that she could not attract Harry in the way she wanted if she appealed only his softer side. To grab his attention, satisfy his needs, and bind him to her, Claris needed to show a similar penchant for cruelty. If Gloria was able to provoke Harry into having sex with her, perhaps Claris could too. She just had to take it slow.

In the coming weeks, the ship was getting back together. With all the basic repairs done and all the upgrades and replenishment finished, there was just one issue left that held them back: recruitment. While there had been plenty of interest, few actually dared to apply, and those who did were either too stupid or too desperate to serve on any other ship. The lack of highly skilled applicants was rather distressing to Claris and the rest of the command crew. With just a little over thirty spacers under his command, Harry was well below the hundred needed to fully exploit his vessel.

Time was running out. Captain Zymen of the Swift Corsair had already sent them a message that he had two frigate captains on board with his plan and only needed one additional ship to complete the party. If Harry couldn't get his ship fully crewed by that time, then he either had to decline the mission or sail out with minimum capacity. Either option would be a disaster.

"Look." Harry began as he held the attention of the command crew. "We'll just pick the applicants who have at least basic competencies in their specializations. I'd rather have some guy with drinking problems but able to get the job done in the end than a perfect Pete who doesn't know which end of a wrench to use. If they have any attitude problems, then I'll be sure to drill that out of them."

The underlying threat of that last statement was not an idle boast.

"Captain, even if we pick the handful of those with actual certifications, we won't be able to fill up the ship with them alone." Cleveland typed something on his datapad, and a three-dimensional schematic of the ship appeared. Several sections were color-coded to show crew allotment.

"We have enough operators for the weapon mounts along with the environmental section. Our hangar crew will need some bolstering, especially if we manage to obtain two additional fighters, but we're not critical in that department. Where we're really hurting is engineering and combat boarding."

"Why are we having trouble with these two departments?"

"Well, engineering isn't something you can pick up easily like environmentalists or turret operation. You actually need to learn the theory, calculate a lot of equations on the fly, and be up to date to all the engine and reactor designs. It's a real bitch to learn, and most pirates don't bother. As for boarding, well, everyone knows it's got the highest casualty rate of all the departments. Close combat is not that popular... unless you plan to offer to modify the boarders' armaments like you did with the First Squad."

"I can't." Harry responded, as he had done a week earlier when Cleveland pressed him privately. "I'm running out of reagents. Unless I'm able to access my stash on Earth, I won't be artificing any

new equipment. The best I can offer is to use blood rituals to add some minor enchantments. It's probably for the best. After all, didn't you say that having too many weapons above Class I in an engagement would be a recipe for disaster?"

"..That is true." The chief conceded. "But without being able to offer Class III armaments, I won't be able to attract any more men than what I've currently got using your original offers. People don't know you that well, and the few rumors they've heard are rather disturbing."

"Hmm.."

Cleveland had a point, but it was rather hard to do anything about it. All the samples of opinions that he took on the local BBS were all embellished accounts of his accounts. These anonymous reports painted him as some sort of barbarian who would rape anything on sight with two legs. Even with the usual skepticism spacers wielded towards these hearsay stories, they were still reluctant to disregard the rumors entirely. With many hundreds of other corvettes and a handful of bigger ships with open job vacancies, the pirates had plenty of alternatives on hand. Trindebal Station's job market was indeed huge, but it was only really of use to Harry if it was actually working out for him. The pattern so far suggested otherwise.

There wasn't any other choice left. The Evie needed more manpower, and she would get it one way or another. If not voluntarily, then by other means.

When Lilliane Selner heard that Harry intended to fill the gaps in the crew allotment with slaves, she dropped all her work and formulated a quick plan to influence his decision. Only after she thoroughly discussed several options with Arnaud did she venture out of the medical bay to confront the captain. Her demand: to be personally in charge of the selection of slaves in the crew.

"I can see why you would care so much, but I'm not running a charity here." Harry responded stoically as he continued to browse in one of his spellbooks. "I need men and women who can do their work well. I have no room for pity cases and free riders here."

She had been expecting this argument. "If you can provide me with a list of desired positions and skills, then I will try to select the most suitable candidates from those constraints."

"An interesting proposal, but I am not that confident in your staffing decisions. I have a feeling you will place a higher importance over other criteria than the ones that I actually care about. You're not someone who has any experience in staffing pirate ships either."

These were all valid objections, but Selner had enough negotiating experience with long-winded academics to recognize there was something more at stake than just her objectivity. For a ruthless pirate, Harry could also be very subtle. "..You want something in return, do you, Harry?"

His lips curled slightly as he nodded. "You're asking a substantial favor here from me, doctor. The least you can do is offer one in return."

She was afraid of this. After having spent several months under his thumb, Selner had developed some measure of understanding in Harry's behavior. Her discussions with Arnaud had been especially enlightening as the ghost was the only person on the ship to offer a glimpse of his private moments. The insights she had gained from their talks were not very hopeful.

Still, in order to change their path down to ruin and damnation, Selner was prepared to sacrifice whatever remaining pride she had left. She had thought long and hard about her plan. With control over the selection of half of the total crew, the doctor would be able to dictate the people Harry and the crew would be working and interacting with. The current crew were all unscrupulous pirates, and their mindset was slowly infecting Harry's already unbalanced morals. If he were to fall completely into the abyss, there might be nothing more in the solar system that could withstand his capacity for destruction. By surrounding the captain with somewhat more mature adults, she might nudge the boy into a more harmonious outlook in life.

The medical officer was well aware that she would likely not be doing a favor for most of the slaves she would select from Trindebal's markets. Sure, they might have worse fates in store in the mines or brothels. However, by forcing them to work on Harry's

payroll, he could force them to commit horrible crimes upon other innocents. This was a terrible fate to bestow upon an pure and unstained soul, but Lily could only hope that these slaves would eventually see the merit in her decision. If she had to sacrifice her dignity to put Harry back on the right track, then she would gladly pay the price.

This was her chosen punishment. If she would doom a bunch of civilians to a life of crime and murder, she could not live with herself without being able to atone for her sins.

Determined to convince the captain, Selner steeled herself to say her next offer with conviction. "I'll do anything you want with my body. Willingly."

The boy didn't react very much to that frank offer. "Perhaps you are misunderstanding our current relationship. I already own your body and I already command your obedience. Your own desires mean nothing to me."

"Are you certain?" She spoke, putting a little hint of sensuality in her tone. Just because she abhorred the awful hedonism amongst the crew didn't mean she was a total bookworm. Selner continued with her feminine persuasion. "Some pleasures cannot be gained when forced."

It seemed her total change in personality had shocked even Harry into a stupor.

With a gentle grip, she lifted Harry's hands away from his reading and shoved the stuffy book aside. Selner then lifted her butt and seated herself on the side of the table. She had deliberately chosen to wear a tighter and thinner lab coat for this meeting which emphasized her curves. With a pleasant enough smile, she parted a button to reveal the red undershirt clinging to her bust. Though there was no cleavage to reveal, the way the tight garment hugged her chest was alluring enough. Her hands glided over her breasts, not exactly touching them, but exciting Harry just enough to visualize their shape. The doctor slowly arced her torso forward like a snake.

"There's no need to call me in at night." Selner stated with a tone that oozed sexuality. "I'll move in to your quarters and sleep in your bed. You'll be able to take me whenever you want."

One of her stiletto heels glided up Harry's legs, caressing the strong and lean muscles underneath the folds of his battle robes. Her short black pencil skirt parted a little more upwards to reveal more of her tight glossy stockings, which showed all the delicious contours of her slim long legs. Harry's eyes were drawn to the narrow tip of her heels, which teasingly inched closer and closer to the visible tent in his crotch. But just when the tip of her foot was touching the clothed cock, she drew back.

The disappointment and frustration of being denied further fueled Harry's passion. His breath had quickened up. His hands were twitching, probably wanting to grab Selner and release the intense pressure of his lust immediately. He held himself back from enacting his desires... a good sign.

"I'll comfort you. I'll listen to you. Whatever is weighing you down, I'll be there to ease your burdens."

Selner slipped off the desk and slinked down to her knees in front of the stupified captain. One of her hands brushed at his ankle and squeezed the coarse magical fabric. The other hand soon administered the same massage to his other ankle. Leaning forward, she let her head rest against Harry's inner thigh. Her head thrust forward slowly, ending only a finger's breath away from the aching erection in front of her. Her tongue extended, and with a trail of spit falling from the tip, licked the empty air just in front of the covered shaft. When her mouth ended at the top, she leaned forward again and let her teeth clack against the buckle against his belt. She took the bit in her mouth and tugged at it, seeming eager to get the obstacle out of the way.

Harry hesitantly complied, lowering his hands to unbuckle his belt. Before he could go on, Selner pushed back his hands with her head and used all of her precision skills to unbutton the top of his pants using only her mouth and teeth. With a seductive smile she swayed her body as if she was a tiger about to pounce her prey. Having enjoyed a commanding view of Selner's slim back and luscious ass, Harry was continually driven towards intense levels of sexual anticipation.

Keeping her intense stare on Harry's green orbs, Selner's teeth latched onto his dragon bone zipper and pulled it down with a gentle tug.

Harry's pants soon pooled down until it reached his ankles. The doctor removed Harry's boots and pulled the item of clothing off completely and dragged her boxers with it, leaving the bottom half of his body bare.

"I'll do anything for you, Harry, even the things you're too ashamed or too ignorant to ask."

Her nose came closer to the throbbing mass of meat in front of her. Selner lowered it to the tip of Harry's cockhead and took a slow and deep sniff of his masculine scent. Faint traces of Harry's urine and other unpleasant smells assaulted her nose, but she put some effort in keeping her expression composed. It was of utmost important to appear she enjoyed the act of sex. Her mouth exhaled, enveloping the dry skin of the excited boy's twitching cock with her heated breath. She repeated the same routine on his wrinkled balls, tickling the sensitive skin and inflaming the desire within Harry's mind to have them licked.

The doctor pulled back from her close proximity to his genitals, denying the boy his relief. She raised her head to look into Harry's lust-filled eyes. Putting up a show, she extended her tongue and licked her lipstick-colored lips. The moisture enhanced the color of her mouth and promised many pleasures yet to come.

"I'll do things to you that you would never experience by using force." The sensual woman said emphatically. "Love and sex go together. To experience one without the other is to live an empty life."

With surprising strength, Selner grasped Harry's ankles again. She used her grip as leverage to swing Harry's legs, up until his knees reached his chest. The sudden shift in posture forced the boy to slide to the edge of the seat and stick out his exposed butt forward. Her thin hands gripped his ass cheeks and eased them gently apart, further exposing his prostate and anus. Her mouth hovered over the puckered enclosure. Her lips pursed, and she allowed the tiniest drop of spit to fall directly onto Harry's sensitive opening.

Harry let out an aching groan that resulted from his half-orgasmic pleasure.

Continuing with her touches, she let her lips touch the pale skin of his cheeks. Her luscious tongue snaked agonizingly close towards her anus, but always veered off at the last moment. The woman teased his prostate lightly, going up over the underside of his balls but then going back down to his buttocks. Her gripping fingers leisurely pulled at Harry's skin, tightening it taut around Harry's anal entrance. The retracting hole had a tiny taste of the cold air. The small cavity longed to be touched and teased in the same manner Selner was currently teasing Harry's skin over his padded butt cheeks.

Her extended tongue finally left his skin and positioned directly over his anus. Hot moist breath caressed the opening like a warm soothing blanket, sending Harry's mind to an overdrive of desire and frustration. Having endured enough of the agonizing torture, he snatched out with to grab the sides of Selner's head and tried to drive her mouth into his ass.

The woman held on and resisted. She didn't resist too rigidly, but just enough to make him take note. "You own my body, but you cannot own my love. If you force me, then you will experience only a shadow of that ultimate devotion. If you want all of me, then you must convince me to want you in return."

"How can I do that?"

"Do you love me, Harry?"

Pushed on by his aching needs, Harry responded with a resplendent "Yes."

"Do you want me to love you?"

"More than almost anything else, my dove."

And thus Selner finally dove in and rewarded Harry's small concession with unparalleled ecstasy. Selner was glad she coated her tongue with anti-bacterial and taste numbing solutions before she engaged in pleasuring Harry.

The next hour was filled with the most sensual and pleasurable acts that Harry had ever enjoyed in his long life. All the rapes he had inflicted upon the terrified witches in his distant past couldn't compare to Selner's wonderful foreplay. She was the first person to reintroduce him in the game of give and take. Her apparent sincerity in her love to him spurred the boy to return the favor. It was the first instance in a very long time that Harry was actually concerned of his partner's enjoyment. He wanted to love her back and prove that he could be worthy of her devotion, however fake it actually was underneath the facade.

A small part of Harry's mind was aware she was motivated primarily out of other interests. Knowing that, he didn't mind very much that he was being manipulated in this manner. What she demanded in return was really not too much and never went against his interest. What she offered in return for a little freedom and influence was far more intense than any other quick shag.

Love was a powerful emotion. Love was what defeated Voldemort, and allowed Harry to experience paradise with his wife. Until she was brutally killed. He never really recovered from that soul-tearing loss.

Despite his affirmations of love, Harry could never see Dr. Selner as his wife. But as his concubine, she could fill the holes that have scarred his soul since his beloved's murder.

The sex wasn't really needed, actually, but it made their relationship much more heated and intense. Twisted though it was, this form of passionate affection provided a convenient vehicle for Harry to forget his regrets. For once, Harry let a woman take charge. Selner confidently stepped in the role of director, dictating the stance and pace at which they moved. She moved him to his bed in order to free up their bodies for more varied acts of pleasure. Quick release was denied, but both of them didn't seem to be in a hurry. Their slow and sensual pace spread out their gratification, but made it all the more memorable. When Harry seemed close to release, Selner pulled back and let his excited erection cool off as she indulged Harry's body with her soft and sizable breasts.

When her tactics of continued deflection finally reached Harry's limit, she lowered herself to finish him off with her mouth. The act of letting a man cum in her mouth a overwhelmingly submissive

gesture, as no normal women would ever enjoy the taste. The hygiene risks were mitigated by her preparation, but no drug could ever make a female grow to like the disgusting white fluid.

With the fate of fifty imprisoned slaves riding on her outcome, she focused on providing the captain with the most wonderful orgasm he could ever experience with a devoted woman's mouth. Her lips continued to suck at the exploding cock, encouraging it to spasm harder in her pooling mouth. Her tongue massaged the ultra-sensitive opening where the cum continued to flood out in thick globs. When the orgasm finally receded, she pulled her suctioning lips from his sensitive dick with a pop. With the most sensuous smile she could manage, she lowered her jaw to reveal the collection of his cum to Harry. The act was so ubiquitous in the porn she used to sample in her college days, and for good reason. Men simply liked to see it, and from Harry's blissful expression, he did too. She closed her mouth again and swallowed.

The afterglow Harry enjoyed as the two cuddled up on his bed was like being exposed to piece of Nirvana. The sensation was incomparable when he held onto Gloria after his climax. Conquering Gloria was an accomplishment. Making love with Selner on the other hand was fulfillment.

Thereafter, Selner made good on her promise and relocated her meager possessions in Harry's roomy quarters. The luxurious king-sized bed held plenty of space to allow them to sleep in peace. While all the blood runes and magical circles were unnerving to her, she was not about to ruin her goodwill with her companion by complaining about them. For just a little piece of her dignity, she could ensure she would have Harry's ear.

Sometimes though, when Harry was off the ship, Selner would cry to herself, lamenting her loss of purity. Was she becoming more like the vicious pirates around her, having resorted to whoring out her body to achieve her goals? She rationalized her decision by telling herself that Harry would grow worse without her intervention. But was that really true? How much power did love have for a boy who seemed inhuman in his obsession to gain more power? Would love ever have precedence over might?

She did not know the answers, but could only continue in her chosen course for the greater good of society.

End Notes: In truth, I don't think explicit lemons have a place at all in published fiction unless the work is clearly geared towards the eroticist genre. Written sex scenes are a distracting or even hijacking influence. Naturally, fanfiction has looser standards, and this fic is no exception. I have never pretended that this fic is any better than other Harry Potter fics. In many cases, it's even worse. Still, even though this fic is pretty much a mishmash of my unrestrained desires and other stupid ideas, I will never put sex at the center of its focus. I'm experimenting with a lot of things, such as narration, characterization and plot structure, but I'm not too keen on drawing up stand-alone lemons.

What I really enjoy the most in sci-fi is the battles and everything around it, such as training, preparation and considering strategies. Most of this fic is therefore geared towards that traditional action aspect in a futuristic setting. The sex is just a portion of the human aspect of this action, and is meant first and foremost to add to the story, not distract from it. I'm not writing the lemons in a way that would provide you guys (and girls, maybe) with the most brilliant piece of jerk-off material. If my goal was to write a good lemon that could be fapped endlessly by everyone, this fic would have been on Adultfanfiction.

Human Resource Management

The array of runes and ritual circles glowed silently in their vigil. Their master slept in peace besides his chosen consort. It was the first morning of their shared sleep together. Throughout the night, Lilliane let the peaceful boy lie on top of her chest. Though the awkward pressure barely allowed her to fall asleep herself, the comfort she was able to provide was worth it. When it was almost time to rise, she decided to give the boy a welcome wakeup. She gently let Harry's head rest on his pillows, then slipped her body down so that her head would come up to his waist.

Dr. Selner then proceeded to massage Harry's balls with her mouth.

When Harry finally woke up, he made his sheer delight known and smiled at the ball munching woman. Selner moved up to stroke his shaft with her mouth and finished his morning climax.

"Man... a guy could get used to this every day.."

"Oh, I hope not, Harry." Selner smiled besides him as she pressed herself against his relaxing side. "Wouldn't you grow tired of me then?"

The boy chuckled a little and leaned in to steal a kiss. "I'll never grow tired of you, dove."

Both of them enjoyed the comfort of laying against each other. Harry really missed this sensation. He faintly remembered the total satisfaction at waking up from a peaceful night with his beloved wife in his arms. Life had been perfect at that time. All the burdens in his life had failed to overcome his steadfast love for his friends. With Voldemort's specter finally moved on to the afterlife, there was no need to have his guard up all the time. After all, the Light had won, right?

How naïve he was at that time.

"What's the matter, Harry?"

"Nothing. Just reminiscing." The boy turned to look at Selner with a needful eye. "Merlin, you remind me so much of her."

"Pardon?"

The boy smiled sadly. "Nothing.."

Their silence stretched on as they continued to cuddle. For Harry, the small trip back to the past had reminded him that he needed to be vigilant. Letting down his guard at these dangerous times was foolish. So many people who depended on his strength had died when he disappointed them due to his delusional belief that Voldemort's death would mark the end of everything evil. With this second chance, Harry would never allow himself to grow soft and weak. This new and avaricious society was just as worse as the Wizarding World with its strange new technologies. Predators roamed in every corner, waiting to strike the weak and unprotected. While the wizard can defend himself with adequate ease, the same might not be true for Selner. Now that he had his first taste of affection, he could never bear leaving her unprotected. He would kill a thousand people if it meant preserving her life.

"Selner, when you will go visit the slave market, I don't want you out there wandering alone. Who knows what all those horny slavers will do to you."

"Just assign a guard to accompany me. I'm sure one of Cleveland's goons could keep me safe."

Harry didn't look very reassured. "Their Class III rifles are rather attention-grabbing. I'd have to deploy the entire First Squad in order to keep you safe, but I've already assigned them to procure more infantry armaments."

"Your foot soldiers don't necessarily have to bring those rifles along. I'm sure they can carry something more conspicuous."

"Maybe.. Cleveland said that his men were rather attached to their new weapons. I don't know, really. I'll ask him for advice. Hopefully he can pull a man off his team to assist you in your selections. All those descriptions of duties, certifications and other qualifications make me dizzy."

"Don't trouble yourself over it. I'm a doctor, remember. I'm a quick study. Just the list with all the requirements is enough for me to figure out what to look out for. You'll get your crew."

Though Harry was still not at ease, Selner intruded in his space and kissed him long and hard, shoving the issue from his mind. A little pleasure before business didn't hurt, especially when those two lovely globes of hers was gliding tantalizingly closer to his steadily rejuvenating cock.

The bedroom was the most magnificent space in the entire citadel. Delicate glass of the highest quality made up every barrier in the chamber, allowing for complete transparency. Nothing was hidden from within or outside. The closets, the chairs, the doors, even the bathroom was completely see-through. The bed itself was no exception. Modern complex diamond layering produced the most exquisite of transparent fabrics ever known to man. Made according to the most enhanced computerized designs, the mattress, comforter and pillows was guaranteed to provide any person with the most efficient recovery cycle. Many executives used the nontransparent version to sleep as little as possible.

That particular use was not being utilized at the moment.

Pierre Antoine Dolohov was for once not in his trademark eccentric outfits. He wasn't wearing anything at all actually. Taking another sip of his transparent liquor, he contemplated the insights he had gained since he first beheld a sample of his opportune discovery. What incredible wonders still lay unexplored in the vastness of space.

When he bought the Helical Visage from the junkyard, he only intended to secure its records and retrace the battle Captain Hargrave's old crew had lost. With the most modern forensic tools, his team of mercenaries combed through the science vessel with a proverbial fine-toothed comb. While the pirates were skilled enough to destroy all recorders and data units and clean up any compromising materials, they hadn't taken something as ubiquitous as the air circulation system into account.

Modern ships were like living, breathing ecosystems. They boasted a very sophisticated set of air, water and temperature circulation units. Fresh air itself was one of the simpler substances to sustain on a ship. In the early days of space travel, ships carried large segments of plant life to naturally replenish the air that was breathed out by only a handful of crew. The process was slow and inefficient, and considerably held back the rush to explore the solar system. It

was only after the invention of a special type of electrosynthesizers that air recycling became cheap and affordable. Unlike trees and plants, the liquid electrosynthesizer packs were small, portable and used electricity instead of light as its energy source. Best of all, it was just a sack of equipment, not a living and breathing organism, so all the careful gardening that was required to keep a biodome flourishing was quickly ditched. Spacers never did turn into good gardeners.

On a civilian starship such as the Visage, a single ventilation network connected to all the areas on the ship would circulate the air in one great cycle. This path began and ended at the environmental chamber, where all the air, water and temperature regulators were located. A modest filter of electrosynths made sure that all the depleted air would pass through its pores and revive the depleted air's oxygen content to an optimal human standard. Normally, these filters were just large enough to pass through only the essential elements of air. Anything bigger such as smoke particles would clog up the filter and needed to be regularly scrubbed by a technician.

Captain Harry's diligent pirates had neglected to do so when they turned the ship over to the junk yard. Though most of the particles stuck in the filters were useless, the small handful of strange blue grains found turned out to have extremely exotic properties.

Pierre's hand reached over to his counter and retrieved the fine plastic bag containing half of the dust in his possession. Enough to fill a salt shaker, but not much more. "So little, yet so charmingly fascinating."

"Hmm?" Another voice murmured under the transparent covers besides Pierre. A distinctive blond head turned to face the man. "Could you please hand over the substance now? I do believe I that I have adequately satisfied your demands."

"Ah, yes, a deal is a deal." The governor said cheerfully as he plopped the bag in front of Star's covered (but still visible) body. Her attractive breasts shifted underneath the covers as she took the bag to examine its contents under the light.

"It's real." Pierre reassured his bedmate. "I wouldn't dare cheat on one of my esteemed guests."

As it should be. "This amount is.. inadequate. There is too little to perform any rigorous tests on this sample."

"That is all that my men could scrape out. A few other milligrams have been wiped from various corners and crevices in the laboratory, but there is truly nothing more."

This left it all to Captain Harry and the surviving researchers of the Helical Visage to reveal the origin of these crystals. What was this substance? Which asteroid did it come from? Many of her fellow associates had been dispatched to the approximate region of space where the research vessel first detected the strange signal in their sensors. It was a good thing that the Visage transmitted their data logs to a local Exploration Society outpost, but now it seemed that the reliability of its readings is rather questionable. All the rocks in that part of the asteroid belt contained only mundane metal ores such as iron or copper. No diamonds, quartz or any other crystalline materials were found, let alone the formation that spawned these remarkable blue crystals.

Somewhere out there in Jupiter's orbit lay an asteroid worth enough to buyout an entire lunar colony.

"Tell me how your researchers first found out the crystals were invulnerable."

"Well, you see, I made a silly request to grind them up into finer pieces, but instead the diamond-tipped shaver turned broken. That immediately caught my attention..."

After Selner's first intimate encounter with Harry, the doctor found herself elevated to a level of greater prominence. Though her formal title was still the chief medical officer, as Harry's first and only concubine she held substantial sway over the crew. A few people such as Claris and Zhang were more senior to her, but hierarchy was never that strictly defined on a pirate ship. Relationships and informal power went a long way into solidifying Selner as the third-most powerful person on the ship. Claris' knowledge and experience was still currently of more value to Harry's present needs. The pirate lieutenant's stature would be difficult to erode.

As for the rest of the crew, the captain made the announcement of Dr. Selner's new status that morning. She was his most beloved

companion, and was therefore entitled to the same level of respect as himself. Anyone who would even look at her the wrong way would be severely reprimanded. Harry wasn't someone who tolerated disrespect, and he unilaterally extended the same expectation to Selner.

It was difficult to cope with at first. Even Zhang seemed hesitant to approach the concubine in conversation. The former professor could hardly believe it himself that the so normally prude Dr. Selner would use her body in such a vulgar manner. The few remaining former research members that look up to her previously steadfast adherence to principles felt betrayed by the doctor's new course. They hid themselves from Selner's sights, afraid that she would rat out their seditious ideas to the captain.

She didn't. Their silly fantasies were too unlikely to ever come to fruit. Selner had not betrayed her ideals – she merely found a different method to achieve them. The way to free themselves from Harry's insanity was not to treat him as an Overlord, but as a friend who was in need of company. As long as the doctor could make Harry devote his attention to her and only her, his desires would slowly intertwine with hers, achieving a balance away from the darkness he was engulfed in. This depended heavily on her skill as a seductress.

If there was one lesson Selner had learned from Harry, it was that power should be exercised. The problem was that her authority didn't extend beyond the medical bay. So she had to show her power in other ways. This recruitment drive was one of them.

++Arrival to –Trindebal Indentured Labor Exchange– in 5 minutes.
Total fee: 20 universal credits.++

"Almost there."

The Trindebal Station central slave register handled hundreds of slaves every day. Pirates from all the corners of Jupiter's orbit arrived frequently to deliver a new batch of slaves taken from ship crews and passengers. The market handled the registration, branding and rudimentary medical treatment for the oft-abused newcomers. Women especially came half-dead most of the time, and needed a thorough recovery period and makeover in order to attract a high price. Independent slave brokers would then buy the refurbished slaves from the central authority and sold them either on

the station or at some other venue. All told, the slavery business was a profitable one, provided the merchandise were kept healthy.

The two most typical destinations for newly purchased slaves were either the brothels or the mines. A woman's life at a whorehouse was very hard. At the lowest segment, a woman had to serve filthy and vicious spacers up to ten times a day. Some faced even worse fates in order to provide the most sadistic clients with an outlet of their perversions. Insanity, mutilation and even death was not too uncommon amongst the unluckiest of bonded women. For those who had the luck to survive, it took hard work and constant diligence to work themselves up to a more respectable clientele, but only if they had the requisite beauty and charm. It was only very rare that a woman could work herself up to become the managing owner of an establishment.

As for the men, their time in the mines would be harsh and short, with only death as their reward. There were sadly many toxic mines where the use of shielded machinery would crush the delicate resources embedded into the surface. Precision mining bots utilized by legal corporations were too expensive and mined too slowly. Many unscrupulous corporations had therefore turned to human labor, driving them to backbreaking work in order to meet the highest quarterly figures. The mining operators cared little for the lives they were ruining with their breakneck pace. A manual labor slave could easily be replaced for a mere ten thousand credits or less. The huge casualty figures were already accounted for in their books as 'equipment' that suffered a three year depreciation period with no salvage value in the end. In short, the slaves were disposable tools.

One major inefficiency in the whole slave trade was that the slaves were never allocated according to their talents. If the prisoners weren't academics that could be cooped up in a lab, then their knowledge, skills and abilities were almost completely neglected by the slavers. Many captured personnel were experienced spacers. Some of them were even eager to serve on a pirate ship to escape worse fates. It was not an infrequent sight to see a pirate captain browsing the wares in order to snatch up a willing recruit.

Many of the rest were not as enthusiastic however. Their conscience wouldn't allow them to defect to a trade which hurt the livelihoods of their friends and family. Many transport haulers were essentially

family enterprises, and the capture of each would see many sons and women sold to brothels. The men who remained behind were incredibly bitter against the entire pirate society.

It was these kinds of men and women Dr. Selner was looking for. She sought spacers who stood by to their principles and resisted easy temptation. Changing the crew's composition of the Eviscerator would provide an environment where Harry would, with any luck, feel less driven to appear strong to the world. With the Hargrave's violent pirates in the minority, the ship would hopefully foster a culture where values such as respect and mercy would take root. Though Harry would never become a saint, there was still a chance that he would mellow out.

++This unit has arrived at the –Trindebal Indentured Labor Exchange–. Journey ends. Total fee: 20 universal credits.++

"Let's get this over with, doctor." Claris grumbled from Selner's side. It was a good thing she said 'doctor' instead of 'whore' like she wanted to say. The moody woman slammed the door on her side open and slipped out the hovercar.

The lieutenant's presence was completely disjuncting. Selner had been carefully avoiding Claris, knowing or at least suspecting her motives to claim Harry for herself. Of all the elements that could disrupt Lily's plan, a jealous ship commander was the most dangerous by far. Neutralizing Claris' influence or eliminating her entirely was an essential step in guiding Harry back to the path to sanity.

When she went out to visit the slave market, Selner expected a guard to accompany her, perhaps even Cleveland himself. So when Claris waited for her outside with a hovercar on standby, the concubine went into a bit of a shock. What was Harry thinking?

Stepping out of the hovercar from the other side, Selner couldn't help but make another attempt. "You don't need to accompany me, Claris. I am perfectly safe on the station."

"On the contrary, dear Selner." The pirate retorted with a polite smirk. "I think there's a lot of risk of getting kidnapped here, and the captain agrees. In fact, he agreed so much that he decided to send his most competent and faithful subordinate to keep you safe. Besides, there

is no one senior enough on the crew who knows as much about staffing ship positions as I do."

The two continued to exchange veiled glares at each other as they passed the entrance of the wide open compound.

"Just remember that I'm the one who selects the candidates." Selner punted back as she kept a healthy distance. "Harry personally granted me the power to authorize the purchase and transfer of slaves."

Touché. "Ah, the captain may have granted you decision authority, but he sent me here with explicit instructions to advise you on your selection. I know for a fact that he dislikes headstrong and rebellious underlings. If he hears you disregarded my advice on that, well..."

This time Selner couldn't restrain her frown. A few headstrong and rebellious crewmen was exactly what the Eviscerator needed to foster a positive environment. If she brought in too much meek and passive recruits, they would all be overwhelmed by the veteran pirates. All that would accomplish is create a new batch of monsters. That would be a huge setback for the concubine.

Her eyes averted from the pirate escort. "Oh, I'll be sure to take your advice into account, Claris."

After registering themselves at the information desk, Selner was given an authorization card that allowed her to register her claim on any slave for sale in the compound. It was a slow day so there was not many pirates or other unsavory figures around. Still, the two women did not miss the envious eyes of the slave vendors around them. Only Claris' uniform and the formidable looking pistol by her side held them all back from attempting anything stupid. Just because clients weren't suppose to be kidnapped didn't mean such a thing happened every now and then. With the appropriate bribe, every regulation could be circumvented.

The pair stepped inside one of the few shops that contained a high number of skilled ship crew.

"Ey," A stimulant-chewing vendor greeted from behind his desk. "Ya lookin' for some fresh meat?"

Clariss answered before Selner could, earning a frown from her. "We're looking for ship recruits. You got any good spacers in your cage?"

"Meh, if you're looking for turncoats, don't look 'ere. None of them pansies are volunteering. Supply's been slow this past month."

"That doesn't matter for us. We just want to have a look at their capabilities."

"Right. Suit yourself. Just don't return them if your dumb scheme fails. I don't do refunds." The overweight salesman reached from under his seat and threw the digitized pad across his desk. "Help yerself."

Doctor Selner snatched the pad before Clariss could. She grinned. "I'm the one handling the selection, not you."

The dark glare she received from Clariss bounced harmlessly off her skin. It wasn't as if the female pirate would physically hurt her. As long as Selner enjoyed Harry's favor, she could do as she pleased, provided she didn't disobey Harry directly.

The cheap electronic information pad contained short profiles of the hundred or so slaves huddling inside the cages in the shop. Ten prisoners of the same gender were confined to every cage. Most of them wore nothing at all, so potential buyers could judge the quality of the merchandise without any fuss.

Almost all of them looked already broken. For a single heart-wrenching moment, she impulsively considered buying the entire lot just so she could bring them away from the cruel reality they would face in the brothels or mines.

Then the concubine reminded herself that she was serving a different purpose. Angering Harry would not endear herself to him. The gap between them would allow Clariss or any other unsavory influence to gain a foothold in his mind. Thus, for her own sake, she should stop considering buying out the entire market. Seeing all the suffering faces around her made it hard for her to justify her decision, but she held on to her plan and continued to examine the data on the pad.

The sixth entry Selner browsed looked very interesting. The slave in question was an average looking man of some bulk swwho served as the Chief of Engineering on a large repair barge. The certifications that he possessed were remarkable. He was not an intellectual powerhouse, but he had a wide range of practical experience. On paper, this Mr. Orsten looked like everything the Eviscerator needed to bolster its lackluster engineering section.

Turning to the vendor, she asked, "Could you please call up Mr. Orsten?"

"Eh? Which number?"

Claris snatched the pad from Selner's hand and ratted off the serial code for the salesperson to fetch the right person. The doctor tried to grab back the pad but Claris kept turning her back on her.

"Give it back."

"Jeez, you're an idiot." The lieutenant spoke plainly, her disgust growing deeper as she read more details. "This guy doesn't have any certification in either high thrust heat management or combat plasma routing. He's fine for slow bulky haulers, but he'd be a disaster if he served on any fast and maneuverable warships like the Eviscerator."

"Does the Evie have any engineers who are better than him?" To that, Claris had no immediately reply. Selner looked smug. The little research she performed beforehand paid off. "Thought so."

The vendor returned with the bound slave in tow. A sophisticated set of energized plastics were embedded on his arms and legs, preventing them from moving independently. The slave could be controlled by the device the slaver held in his hands. It initiated any set of simple pre-programmed movements such as walking or sitting. The huge man looked indignant of being towed in front.

"This guy 'ere looks like an alright fella for any heavy-duty work. A bit of a stubborn streak though. Says he'd rather keel himself than raid a ship. Hah! The sanctimonious bastards. It's not like the corporations their working for are sucking us hard working people dry. Anyway, fifteen thousand creds and he's yours. A premium price for a premium set of muscle. He's a hardy fellows."

Selner approached the man and judged his demeanor. There was anger, pride, but also a calm measure of dignity and reserve. This would be a person who could stand up to Harry's worst excesses.

"What do you think on working on a pirate ship?" She asked him. "Will you obey orders?"

Orsten simply spat on her face.

The vendor quickly activated a punishing shock and muffled the prisoner's mouth before leading his merchandise back into his cage. "Sorry 'bout that, a few of these slaves aren't very worked in yet!"

"I don't mind." Selner replied as she wiped her face clean with her self-cleaning lab robe. "I'll take him."

Her escort didn't like that decision. "Now wait a minute. That guy's too proud to submit to Harry's authority."

The two argued back and forth on Orsten's suitability. Selner emphasized his vast experience and his many leadership positions. Claris regarded such a powerful leader as a risk to the ship, and thought that his skills ran the wrong way. In the end, they never resolved their differences.

"I'm going to add him on the list and that's that. If Harry objects, he can tell me that after he's seen Mr. Orsten's performance."

The resentful Claris couldn't do anything else but promise that the captain's need for absolute control would weigh heavier than Orsten's mediocre talents.

They continued with the same kind of spar over much of the forty-nine other positions. None of the following slaves they selected were as headstrong as Mr. Orsten, so Claris could not provide that much of an objection to Selner's choices. It was a devious move by the so virtuous-looking academic. Claris was finding herself largely outmaneuvered by the stuffy bitch, something she had never expected in her life. Perhaps this was the real tiger, the side of Selner that was so successful in deluding Harry into taking her as his concubine.

Even through this recruiting mission, Claris was unable to hold Selner back from selecting dominating personalities and morally conscious spacers. If she chose to object strongly to every fifty selections, she would risk wholesale rejection by her captain and put her into a deeper disadvantage. However, if she stayed silent, then she would be allowing Selner to do whatever she planned to do with the new crew. Claris had the suspicion it would not be in Harry's best interests, but without hard proof she could not accuse Selner of sabotaging his strength, especially when that dumb broad held currently held the captain's favor.

This loss was yet another minor hindrance in Claris' quest to become Harry's Queen. Without being able to prove herself in battle, the pirate lieutenant was slowly being obscured by others. And with the new influx of several highly skilled spacers, her own uniqueness was called into question. For now, she was the only person who knew enough about the ship to run it as a captain. But what if one of Selner's slaves would learn enough to be appointed as a substitute? What then? If that bitch held enough sway over Harry's love-addled mind, the doctor could somehow contrive to have Claris eliminated.

Claris' earlier missteps had let Selner catch up in the race for the wizard's affection. If this pattern went on, Harry would become completely ensnared in Selner's web. For the sake of Harry and her own safety, Claris needed to reverse her fortunes quickly. For the first time since she decided to seduce Harry, she realized that time was against her. With another competitor pursuing Harry more boldly than herself, Claris needed to match Selner's moves with risks of her own before it was too late.

Perhaps the coming raid on the diplomatic convoy would provide some occasions for 'accidents' to occur. With so many systems under attack, the medical bay might experience a fatal breach.

To Harry, it seemed that most business deals were done over dinner. He didn't understand the need to spin the illusion that everyone was friends or anything. Couldn't he just sign an electronic contract and be done with it? But no, Captain Zymen insisted that every participant in the coming raid should come and know each other better. At least he had some influence on the choice of restaurants. Mexican food was the only cuisine the boy was familiar with. Spicy, but at least the dishes seemed familiar. Pasta was pasta no matter

how many hundreds of years have passed, even though most of the ingredients came from grotesquely mutated plant life.

"Ah, good to see you here, Captain Harry." The captain of the Swift Corsair greeted him. "You are the last one to arrive. Please, have a seat."

Entering the quiet but festive-looking restaurant, Harry took in the other guests. Besides Zymen were two other men and one female captain. He was glad the lone woman wasn't Gloria or any other familiar face. The forty-something year old woman had a hardened but controlled bearing, and regarded him with a neutral expression.

Deciding to test her out, Harry approached her first and held out his hand. "Hi. I'm Harry of the Eviscerator. It's a mobile carrier."

The female captain declined to take Harry's hand. "Captain Rysa, of the missile frigate Arbalest. I heard of Captain Gloria's assault. I hope.. you can keep your hands to yourself."

Ouch. "You needn't to worry, Rysa. Captain Gloria couldn't keep her hands to herself, so I was unfortunately forced to persuade her to think otherwise."

Rysa was not amused at all. With an indignant snort she turned her head to the opposite direction, preferring instead to stare at a fresco of a pair of chimpanzees who wore sombreros. The monkeys seemed to be.. masturbating.

The other two captains across the table rose to meet the boy instead. A grey-haired but energetic man greeted Harry first. "So I finally meet the youngster who is making all the waves lately. Pleasure to meet you Harry."

"Likewise, captain..?"

"Call me Urban. Don't ask." The old man introduced with an amiable grin as he shook Harry's head with a firm squeeze. "My family's been in the pirating trade for five generations, and I've got a little grandkid who's eager to serve on my ship next year."

"What's your ship?"

"The beautiful Light of Pericles, a wonder of a grappling frigate. Once you're in her jaws, there's no hope for you left."

The other person besides Urban made a gagging gesture. "Don't listen too much to this gramps. He's too much in love with his own ship."

"Hey, I still have a wife, you know?"

Rolling his eyes, the remaining captain turned to Harry to introduce himself. "I go by the handle of Prestor. My ship the Lancelot is a destroyer."

A destroyer!

"She's the designated gatecrasher of Zymen's motley fleet." The handsome blond captain continued. "The Lancelot is a very expensive lady to maintain, so I won't do this job with just an equal share of the spoils."

"Don't worry." Zymen called from his seat. "Everyone's agreed to split our shares up by tonnage. Since your ship weighs at least twice as the average frigate, you'll be certain to rake in a hundred million creds Prestor."

"Good."

Having performed all the introductions, the captains seated themselves in their secluded corner in the Mexican restaurant. The waiter arrived and handed out an authentic Earth paper menu for them to browse. Everyone was eager for Captain Zymen to share the details of their job. Everyone eyed each other in careful appraisal. Except for Harry, they were all established and experienced pirates who ran a tight ship. They were competent in their jobs, and chosen specifically by Zymen for their lack of moral objections to the practice of slavery. This meant that all of them weren't above stabbing their fleet mates in the back when the opportunity arose.

Captain Zymen therefore broached this topic first. "I know that many of you don't know each other. Asking you to trust everyone would be too much for me to ask. With this out in the open now, we can try to come up with a solution that would not see us all killed. I've got two

suggestions myself. Either we can ask the Callistoan Maffia to mediate. Madame Green is willing to receive the payment from the client and hold on to it until our fleet returns from the nab job. From the sensor logs that we would have transmitted during our engagement, she would be able to figure out whether one of us had been playing foul. The only problem with this option is that our transmissions can be intercepted by our opponents."

"Ah, the tyranny of Murphy's Law." Captain Urban remarked as he sipped his sweetened wine. "Anything that can be hacked, will be hacked."

"And the other suggestion?" Rysa asked curtly.

"Well, we can do the classical captain switch." The organizer of this gathering leaned back against his seat. "I could captain the Eviscerator, Harry the Light of Pericles, Urban the Arbalest, and so on. It stops us from doing anything stupid. If your own ship is in trouble, you have to help out. Also, being surrounded by men not of your own will pressure you to keep to the agreement. What do you all think?"

Pretty much everyone except Harry shook their heads. The boy only declined to react because he didn't really understand the whole idea.

"Alright, if no one has a better suggestion, we'll take Madame Green's assistance." Zymen then let out a little frown. "Though she did demand a twenty percent cut of the client's payout."

"What!" Prestor yelled erupted from his seat. "That's outrageous!"

"Well there isn't any other group to turn to than the Callistoan Maffia. Either you accept the twenty percent cut, or we go through with the captain switch."

A heated debate raged on about the issue as the first hot dishes arrived at the table. Since Harry's share would be at least forty million either way, he didn't really care to step in the middle of the fight. It wasn't like he really had any influence on the performance of the Eviscerator. Perhaps a stint on another ship would be fun.

End Notes: I'm glad that I'm starting to receive multi-lined reviews. It indicates that this fic is starting to get somewhere and has satisfied

a number of you very greatly. My fic hasn't been included into any notable C2 communities yet except for the occasional 'my favorites list' ones, but I hope some of them will take note of this story when I hit the 100k words mark.

Malicious Intent

The bright pastel-colored stateroom offered a resplendent view of Trindebal Station and its steady flow of traffic. Like fish in an aquarium, the pirate ships went about their business with seemingly no idea that they were observed. They were, of course, not just by the occupant of this room, but by the Trindebal Station authorities and even the other ships themselves. Everyone kept an eye on everyone. It was impossible to be completely anonymous in the age of space.

In the back of the working room sat a single person. Gloria was leaning back in her chair, contemplating the patterns on the moving digital mural as she brooded. A couple of credit cubes bounced in her hand. She rolled the cubes down on her desk like she was playing craps. Since the cubes were just regular bits of metal and plasticized glass, there was no meaning in the throw.

By all rights she should just put away the cubes. But she couldn't. Not since that night. Except for showering and other essential chores, Gloria kept the cubes with her as if they haunted her. They very well might have. The face of that wickedly demonic boy kept popping up in her thoughts. It was as if he dominated her even in his absence. The thrill he gave her was so overpowering that other distractions turned out to lack the same passion.

As she brutally worked her way up the pirate hierarchy, Gloria thought that nothing would excite her except the prospect of battle. She was wrong. In that single fatal evening at the club, her very perception of the universe was shaken. Proving herself with a beat-up patrol corvette was difficult. Executing a risky gamble to steal the Mirrored Abyss was reckless. Now, at the pinnacle of her rise, she had been brought down by some snot-nosed brat who couldn't keep his hands to himself.

There was nothing impressive about this 'Harry'. His alias sounded so stupid he might as well have called himself Bob or John. Strangely enough, there were no prior records on him anywhere on the net. That probably meant he hadn't done anything notable before his takeover of the Eviscerator, which was also rather reckless. Sure, the kid might have some balls, but the Eviscerator was probably so lethargically managed that any kid could have done the same.

Hargrave was a man who still stuck by the old rules. His sudden fall just proved that times were changing. Industry and trade was blooming and you'd have to be crazy to limit yourself to lone little transports. This new Captain Kid at least had the guts to take on the Orion Constellations, but only time would tell whether he also had the wiles to survive amongst other sharks.

Still.. Gloria's intuition hinted that the kid would go far. His ruthless ambition was unbound. To not only escape from her ball-grabbing hold, but to turn the tables on her and exact retribution without any fear was either foolish or arrogant. The boy exuded confidence. There must be some hidden strength in him that allowed him to overpower her and take her body as his. His lanky body – while physically unimpressive – was still able to subdue her military instincts and training.

In fact, the boy plainly mocked her illusion of strength. To be defiled in such a public manner was a very pointed humiliation. It wasn't about the physical harm. MarsMil had given her the same conditioning against sexual harassment as their other spacers. The blow to her reputation and pride was much, much worse. Other captains regarded her as one of the most skilled and vicious raiders this side of Jupiter. To be let some kid have his way with her body like a cheap whore shattered that dignified image. Now she was just 'another' captain, someone who had tasted defeat and could be defeated again. Even her own subordinates didn't fear her as much anymore.

Gloria took the credit cubes back in her hand and rolled them around in her grip. She needed to salvage her reputation. What better way to achieve that than to return Harry's change?

She activated a visual showing a map of the local environment. Trackers placed between the thruster nozzles of the least-advanced ship, the Swift Corsair, had been sending out a constant signal disguised as infrared interference. None of the sensor operators in Zymer's little fleet should have been able to detect these trackers unless they knew what they were looking for. Pirates usually didn't. Grinning, the woman shut the image off and raised herself from her seat.

The hunt was on.

In the end, Captain Prestor's stinginess bulldozed all other opinions. Twenty percent from a two-hundred-and-fifty million payout is too exorbitant a price to prevent backstabs. While everyone held varying competencies in captaining a ship, their subordinates were all men and women who knew what they were doing and could do without their regular leader's direction. Having a stranger in the captain's seat would not disrupt their operations significantly. Besides, it wasn't like the visitor would have any actual power.

Sure, the switched captain would enjoy the privileges befitting his rank, such as being able to sit on the captain's chair on the bridge and have the captain's quarters all to himself, but in an actual battle the direction would flow instead from the executive officer. Perhaps if the visiting captain asked nicely, he or she could order the walls painted pink or have fish for dinner instead of pork. But disturb anything important and they'd get fobbed off. Important ship systems should as weapons, environmentals and engineering were all strictly out of the visitor's control.

They were nothing more than hostages, really. Harry, Prestor, Rysa, Urban and Zymen were all valuable pawns in the midst of hostile hands if their own crews tried anything treacherous. If the Eviscerator tried in any way to attack a damaged ally, Harry would quickly face an army of angry spacers whose loyalty he didn't command. It was quite an ingenious solution by the pirates. Most ships ran on the charisma of their captains, and thus most crews weren't willing to risk their captains' lives. The system wasn't perfect though. If the crew was sufficiently dissatisfied, they could just kill their guest officer and do whatever they wanted, heedless of their own helpless captain in the midst of the enemy ship.

As Harry himself had carefully induced every new slave selected by Dr. Selner with a slightly tweaked Mark, he wasn't too worried. Claris, Selner and the rest of his senior were too dependent on his power and success to double-cross him. He had warned his men that if he were to perish, the Mark would start feeding on their life force. It wasn't totally true, but the threat was enough to keep them on edge and prevent any schemes to assassinate him. Sadly, that did leave room for other sort of troublemaking, but he relied on Selner's promise to him to keep the new entrants in line.

She'd pay if she couldn't keep her word.

Hopefully the visiting captain on his ship would not mind all the blood runes splattered all over the ship. Harry was already imagining what Captain Rysa would think of his quarters.

The front door to his stateroom suddenly chimed and opened up to let in one of the Lancelot's officers.

"Captain Harry." The old and steady executive officer called as he stepped in Prestor's stateroom. "You called for me?"

"Yes, lieutenant... um..."

"Marlow." The man answered stoically.

Harry leaned forward in his seat from the desk and put away Marlow's information sheet. Somehow the boy wasn't so surprised that a flamboyant person such as Prestor would get a down-to-earth executive officer. Lieutenant Marlow was a Second who knew his business and possessed enough solid experience to anchor Prestor's wildness. This combination might work well if there was an actual captain around to issue orders. As a guest with no real authority, Harry couldn't influence the stoic executive officer. This might come back to bite them in the butt when a desperate situation calls for rapid choices and dangerous risks. Unexciting commanders didn't make for successful commanders.

He began to speak, conscious that he couldn't dictate like he could on his old crew. "I'd like to clarify our roles on this ship. Since the Lancelot will be the first to close in, we need to have a clear chain of command."

"There is no need for clarification." The lieutenant replied, more than a little dumbfounded. "You are the captain."

Sighing, Harry gestured at Marlow's command ring. "We all know that's bullshit. You're the one in control here. No, before you speak up, I'm not looking to usurp your command or anything like that. I don't have any interest in taking over this ship. I just want to make our positions clear to each other."

"I don't understand.. sir."

"Have you noticed that your men are not paying much attention to you?" He received an empty stare in return. "Captain Prestor has always been the one issuing orders, right? How do you think they feel now that they are left alone with you?"

This time Marlow did react. "Are you saying I don't qualify for command, sir?"

"You're deflecting the question. I'm not doubting your competence. I don't know a thing about starships, and frankly, I don't care to learn. But being the captain of a ship is more than just knowing all the systems. Your crew might not like me very much, but they watch me like a hawk, ready to comply if I give out any small request. I don't see the same eagerness when they are facing you alone. Do you understand what I'm getting at?"

"Alright, I get your point." Marlow let out, but his expression hardened considerably. "However, I cannot give you any concessions. Captain Prestor already told me what to do if you started to demand more power."

That wasn't something Harry had expected, or factored in his equation. "Oh? What have you been ordered to do then? Please enlighten me."

The executive officer made a signal, and instantly the door opened up to let an armored marine through the doorway. The clanking of the soldier's heavy bearing resounded loudly against the sterile white tiles of the stateroom. A menacing Class II pulse rifle rested calmly over the big man's shoulder. At least the grunt had the courtesy not to aim at Harry.

"This is.. rather excessive." Harry sordidly remarked as he twitched his fingers towards his sidearm. "If I must remind you, I am still a guest on this ship. If you do not acknowledge me as a captain, at least have the decency to maintain the usual courtesies. Or is that too much for ravenous pirates like you?"

Lt. Marlow didn't rise to take the bait. "It's well known that you've been stationed on this destroyer because you are the least competent of all the captains in our fleet. There's no need for you to interfere with the Lancelot's internal affairs, so I would kindly ask you to confine yourself to these quarters. If you have any complaints to

make, please take it up to Captain Prestor on the Light of Pericles. You still retain a limited amount of communication privileges on the shipnet. If that's all, enjoy your stay here, captain."

The acting captain turned to leave the stateroom. The marine on the other shand seemed to have no intentions of budging out of his comfortable spot. This was not what Harry wanted to deal with so early in his stay on this military warship. With her thick armor and powerful medium-range railgun broadsides, the Lancelot would be slugging it out with any powerhouses the enemy convoy would have. Quick thinking and decisive action was needed. Marlow's methodical planning and intimate knowledge of every single detail of every single bolt and nail was only of use when Prestor let his Second deal with all the boring stuff.

"I would not go past that door if I were you, Marlow. We can still negotiate a fruitful accommodation."

"Bite me."

What Harry was about to do would be the first time since his awakening that he interfered in matters not directly linked to his own. The wizard regretted taking this action, but he would not allow his fate and the fate of his crew on the Evie to depend on the whims of this underwhelming Second. If he had to create a major incident and waste a large amount of his magic to do so, then so be it. The people on the Lancelot were not his men. He owed them nothing.

"I regret taking this course of action."

Harry pressed the button to close the door in Marlow's face.

He then withdrew his revolver in a smooth action and trained it towards the guard. The armored man had not expected to actually shoot a captain, and the way Harry drew his weapon seemed so innocent that his rifle was only halfway before his entire body was struck with a Reductor curse. The terrible impact crunched right through his armor like a foil and caused the torn sheets of metal to create a multitude of tears in his stomach. The faceless guard cried out in horrid agony as his open wounds gushed out splatters of blood.

"You're crazy!" Marlow said as he backed off as he tinkered with his command ring. "You can't possibly take over the ship by yourself!"

The air started to change around them. Oxygen rapidly filtered out of the room at the same time as Marlow's upper uniform formed an airtight dome over his head.

Did he really think Harry's battle robes were just for show?

Though his battle robes still eschewed most modern features embedded into spacer clothing, the wizard did enchant some useful functions to fit into this time period. He calmly pulled up the cowl hanging behind his back and let it cover his head. A small magical force field glowed into being in front of him, sealing his head from the oxygen-deprived air.

With that done, he spun his firing chamber before blasting the executive officer with a stunner. The weedy man fell without any further fuss.

Marlow was still needed alive.

The old curses had started acting up in Harry's sleep lately, reminding him of their growing hunger. His last few stunts since his awakening had fed the long-dormant magic, bringing them closer to awakening. While his coming plan to take charge of the Lancelot would take a lot of magic, the investment would eventually be worth it. The afflicted boy couldn't really afford to wait for a year to round up the credits for a passage to Earth.

Harry withdrew his Elder Wand and flicked it at the disemboweled corpse of the guard. The spilled blood began to animate. Its vile liquid shape morphed and contracted as it crept towards the unconscious Marlow. The seemingly sentient fluids slowly enveloped the floor around Marlow's unconscious form and stretched themselves into elaborate runes and sigils.

A simple Mark wouldn't work. In his short time amongst the destroyermen, he learned that they were very different from his ramshackle scoundrels onboard the Evie. Prestor had a great eye for talent and was proficient in motivating his crew. The men and women were well-dressed, well-groomed and well-trained. The Mark would not function strong enough to make his takeover discrete.

What he needed was more than forced obedience, or rudimentary mind control. Something that was too complex to cast using only blood, but required its life force to amplify the effects of the spell.

The ritual that Harry was about to perform was dark and obscure. The cost was high – both in blood and in magic. The time needed to prepare the site and invoke the ritual would take hours. Other inconveniences such as not having other ritualists with him to channel the spell properly would degrade the quality of his results. The best Harry could hope for was a botched job that somehow functioned well enough.

The worst was too horrible to describe.

In the end though, Harry was taking a risk by investing his dwindling magic. Should it work out, then he would have another ship at his disposal. If not, then he would deal with the consequences without fear.

Professor Zhang, nominally third in command of the Eviscerator, was currently at the receiving end of an angry tirade.

"Unacceptable, completely unacceptable!" Captain Rysa raged as she looked on at the large collection of idle crewmen lounging in the mess hall. "Why are you letting these barely pacified slaves wander around your ship like gawking tourists? They should be restrained and confined in the brig!"

The Asian hurriedly guided her off to somewhere less public. "Captain Harry has made sure to keep them under control."

"Then where are the slave collars? The shock bands? The limb arrestors? I see no constraints at all that would insure their cooperation."

"Then I am afraid you will just have to deal with it, captain." Doctor Selner chose to appear from the corner of the corridor. A tiny swagger infected her steps as she neared the pair. "We've been out in space for over a day and nothing's fallen apart yet. You really should give our new crewmen a chance."

"And who are you suppose to be, doctor?" Rysa raised her eyebrows and put her hands on her hips. "One person said you were Captain Harry's fuck bunny. Another person says you're the unofficial caretaker of all these slaves. Perhaps most surprisingly, none of the crewmen on this ship even mentioned you were the chief medical officer. I had to pull that out of the records."

Selner only smiled at Rysa's bewilderment. "We don't pay too much attention to the hierarchy on this ship. Captain Harry can be rather.. disorganized in that regard. Nevertheless, the ship is still working fine and nothing is falling apart. You really should not concern yourself with these trivial concerns, captain."

"There's too much at fault to not worry! Everything I see is a perversion of standard practice. Especially this," She pointed towards a set of runes covering a systems panel. "This does not make any sense, and most of the crew think so as well! And don't let me even get started on the captain's quarters. I cannot even bear to sleep amongst such gruesome fixtures."

The professor decided to cut the visiting captain off before she could criticize the ship any further and dragged her away from Selner. Some bystanders hanging around had started to grow more insulted as Rysa went on with her complaints. It wouldn't do much good for everyone if relationships on the Eviscerator would deteriorate. With the sudden influx of headstrong and barely restrained slaves with little time to work them in the crew, the atmosphere was like a tinderbox. One incident could spark of a disastrous riot that could engulf the entire vessel into anarchy.

"Let go of me!" Rysa growled as she yanked her arm from Zhang.

"Look, I get what you're saying, but this has worked out quite well enough. You can complain all you want, but is that really going to change things? We're hundreds of thousands of kilometers away from Trindebal already, and we're not just going to turn around because you don't like the staffing."

"We can still confine the slaves to the brig." Rysa suggested sullenly alongside Zhang.

"And what would that accomplish? We'd alienate the newcomers, underman our stations, and all for what? More security? Harry hired them for a reason."

"You mean Selner hired them for a reason."

"Fair enough. But she has as much stake in the stability of this ship as any of us. We're not going to run off or anything like that. Just stop antagonizing the slaves and they should come around eventually by themselves."

The captain wasn't convinced, but Zhang had eventually swayed her over with the need to be discrete. Rysa was bursting with ideas on how to put the crew back into shape, but the intervention wouldn't work with these men. They were unruly, sullen and only performed with half of their potential on their duty stations.

In Selner's opinion, they needed to adjust to their new situation, to which the command crew reluctantly agreed to. Rysa and a few others preferred the more proactive approach, but without much power to enforce her will she couldn't go far. Only Harry himself can make the crew obey.

The key was Chief Orsten, who took over in engineering. His forceful personality and senior bearing made him the most natural person to look up to for the sullen recruits. Luckily, he and Selner had made some accord with each other. Orsten would not agitate the crew into doing something rash in exchange for.. something. What, Zhang didn't know, but it must have been extremely convincing to move the forceful man into making himself subordinate to the doctor.

Still, one man could not change an entire group's direction. The grievances against piracy were just too strong for those who had suffered brutally at its hands. There needed to be more accommodation. If Harry was here, he could just intimidate the newcomers into submission. But since he wasn't here, all of the senior officers were basically flailing about in the water.

The clash between Claris and Selner was especially disruptive. As someone who commanded the respect of more than half of the crew, the medical doctor was a veritable power broker. Her position as Harry's bed mate made her impervious to any threats and sanctions.

Clariss on the other hand was Harry's designated second-in-command and in overall command of the ship. Her position at the top of the hierarchy allowed her to issue formal orders and rearrange any aspect of the Eviscerator. Despite those privileges, her power was still constrained by Selner's influence.

Both women held different motivations and both desired different things. Harry was the glue that kept them from diverging. With him gone, all started to turn into hell. Zhang was propelled in the uncomfortable position of trying to mend relations between the two while keeping Rysa off everyone's backs. Difficult, but he had handled many challenges in his life.

Three days later, an aft portside maneuvering thruster exploded violently throughout the night shift.

The alarm in Prestor's quarters blared Harry awake. Decades of being hunted to the ends of the world had given him the ability to shrug off any sleep in seconds. It took half a minute to magically equip his robes and weapons. It only took a few seconds more to fumble with the electronic controls of his communicator.

The night-time duty officer of the Lancelot appeared on a screen. The man – not Lieutenant Marlow, sadly – was issuing orders to the bridge crew at a calm measured pace and did not even turn towards Harry until he was done. And when he did, he didn't look very pleased with Harry's interference. "Yes? What is it now, Captain?"

"I'd like to know what's going on. Are we under attack?"

The lieutenant looked at some piece of data off the communication screen. "One of our ships suffered damage. Some kind of thruster malfunctioned and exploded. No signs of any enemy presence so far. The fighters from the mobile carriers are scrambling to expand our sensor perimeter. Hold on, we're receiving orders from the squadron commander."

The bridge chatter increased again as more details came through.

"Bring the ship to yellow alert. Cut off main engines. Engage the power matrix. Cover the Eviscerator."

The Evie! Harry hunched forward and tried to peer into the sensor data projected on the bridge. "Is there something wrong with the Eviscerator?"

"It's the damn ship that decided to blow up this quiet night. Damn rookies, don't you guys know how to keep your bucket in one piece?"

Getting anything useful from this insolent bridge officer was fruitless. Harry mercilessly cut off the feed and opened an audio link to Marlow instead.

"Take over from that idiot on the bridge."

"I'm already on my way."

Harry moved towards the exit. "I'll be present on the bridge as well."

"That's not—"

"Don't forget your place, Marlow."

"..Yes sir."

Although the destroyer was more than twice as large as a frigate or mobile carrier, the senior officers were all quartered less than a minute's walk away from the bridge. Harry entered the bridge just after Marlow took over from the night-shift duty officer. The ticked off officer glowered at Harry's presence.

It was time to make a statement.

As Marlow approached the captain's seat, Harry quickly overtook the slow officer and sat on the chair himself. The executive officer stopped, blinked, then meekly accepted the boy's assortment. He instead diverted to the tactical plot. A bloom of lights and displays lit up as his chair recognized his command ring.

Harry configured his own displays to put the Evie into focus. The reality-enhanced image of the sleek mobile carrier soon enveloped his main holographic screen. The damage was actually quite modest. If the scanner didn't highlight the smoke trail leaking out the back side of the ship, then he wouldn't have noticed the damage.

All of the bridge crew were obviously confused at who to report to. For now, besides Marlow, no one else on the ship was affected by any magical enchantments. In this early stage, none of the men and women serving on this destroyer should exhibit any abnormal behavior. Sure, one marine was missing, which caused quite a stir, but that did not mean that something was drastically wrong onboard.

Sadly, it looked like the same could not be said for the Evie.

"Open a communication channel to the bridge of the Eviscerator, please."

"But sir, Captain Zymen prohibited all intership communications unless we're in battle. To open a direct channel would conflict with his instructions."

"Are you out of your mind? There's a ship suffering from a fire right now. Who knows if there's any attackers lurking nearby?" Harry glared back at the communications tech. "Open a channel already."

The tech deferred to lieutenant Marlow, who reluctantly gave his wordless consent to Harry's direct order. The confusion on the bridge still lingered, but that wasn't Harry's problem right now.

The screen eventually connected to the Evie, showing a disorganized off shift that looked like they were on the verge of becoming overwhelmed. Some of them were literally running around, switching from station to station to check every setting. In the midst of the chaos sat Claris in her signature black uniform. She seemed to have already anticipated that Harry's call. A faint frown marked her mouth as she turned from her data to the incoming channel.

"Captain Harry."

"Claris, what's going on at the Evie?"

"A miniature fuel container in the aft upper deck somehow caught fire and exploded. The entire port thruster connected to that container blew with it. All kinds of debris spilled out into the adjacent corridor. Damage reports are still incoming, though I can tell you this explosion is only an isolated incident. We're not being ambushed by other ships."

The lack of evidence of any outside influence put Harry more at ease. Still, a blown out thruster was not a very desirable occurrence, and to his current understanding such a malfunction should have never happened in the first place. He let Claris direct her bridge for a few minutes in order to put the ship back in order.

"Well?"

"Sir, I've been checking the data logs. Nothing indicates that there has been any tampering or sabotage. All camera logs report nothing unusual. As of this moment.. we cannot determine the cause of the incident, except that such a malfunction is unlikely to have occurred naturally. The emergency fuel tanks for each directional thruster are deliberately placed in a protected cocoon away from any major power lines and high-intensity systems. Maintenance performed in that section is also up to standard to my knowledge, so it cannot be simple neglect."

A second beep sounded throughout the bridge of the destroyer. The comm tech turned from his screen to face Harry. "Captain, there's an incoming channel from the Arbalest. It's Captain Zymen sir, do you wish to speak to him?"

He waved his hand. "Put him through. Initiate a three-way conference between the Eviscerator, Arbalest and Lancelot."

The grim face of Zymen came online. He acknowledged Claris and Harry with a hasty nod. "Any danger?"

"No external danger, sir. The Eviscerator is settling down from red alert and we have work parties extinguishing the remaining fires."

"Good. But that still leaves the cause of this incident unclear. Is there any evidence to suggest that this is deliberate attack?"

"We can't rule that out."

Claris wanted to continue on, but a new figure stepped in front of her. Captain Rysa hastily buttoned up her self-ironing uniform.

"Zymen! This incident is the last straw! The entire place is a madhouse! You have to give me command authority or else this entire cattle pen will descend into chaos!"

"Whoa whoa, Rysa, calm down. Can you start from the beginning?"

To the apparent dismay of Claris, Rysa began to vent out her entire pent-up frustrations. Everything wrong about the ship was spilled out as a flood of expletive ridden words that were barely coherent to anyone else.

The blood runes strewn all over the ship gave a disorganized impression of the ship that encouraged unruly men to behave disrespectfully. Claris grew more flustered as Rysa pointedly described the chaotic crew composition, of which only a third were proper pirates. The rest, she described as wannabes and "involuntary slackers only a few days out of their slave cages and already plotting for mutiny." The exploding fuel canister was conveniently located close to her guest quarters, she noted pointedly.

"Frankly, I don't feel safe in this environment anymore. I neither have the authority nor the sanity to restore discipline here. I want out. I want to swap with Harry. At least Prestor knows how to run a tight ship. Let the boy clean up his own mess."

The squadron leader didn't like what he had just heard. The whole point of a captain switch was to remove a power broker from the centre of his base and hold him hostage amongst a crew that owed no fealty to him. Usually, a visiting captain held inconsequential power, allowing the executive officer and the rest of the command crew to take the reins. Evidently, the Eviscerator was so disorganized that a strong leader was needed. Either he could grant Rysa authority to exercise her will as an actual captain, or he could send Harry back to let him sort the situation out. Neither were very palatable choices.

This entire mess wasn't palatable to begin with.

Zymen was not too paranoid to suspect this whole incident was fabricated to either allow Rysa or Harry to consolidate their base of power on the Eviscerator. Common sense told him to station another captain on the ship, preferably himself, but from the way he

understood it he would just be as ineffective as Rysa. The only other conceivable option was to send boarders over from other ships in order to pacify the Eviscerator, but that took up too much manpower. The point was to use their marine force on the enemy ships, not their own. They had less than three weeks to get everyone up to sync with all the battle tactics he had formulated in his head.

"Alright, I'll approve the switch on one condition." The leader turned towards Harry. "While the way you manage your ship is your own damn problem, it still affects our group performance. The other captains are going to throw up a fuss if they hear you're sent back to your own ship due to problems of your own fault."

"What's the condition, then?"

"I'm deducting five percent of our total earning out of your percentage share. That's about seven million credits at least."

Seven million out of fifty or so million was a substantial penalty, and Harry would ordinarily refuse such a request. This crisis was not of his own design to begin with. He had no desire to abandon his machinations onboard the Lancelot to hammer the recently expanded crew back in shape. On the other hand, the Eviscerator and her crew were undeniably his responsibility. Their ramshackle performance would reflect badly on him, causing his share of the pot to shrink even further if the complaints continued to persist.

In the end, Harry just had to hope his gamble with Lieutenant Marlow on the Lancelot would succeed. If so, the small five percent he'd give up now would be peanuts compared to the wealth he would rake in. That is if everything else went right.

"I accept." Harry said. "I'll take one of Lancelot's shuttles and return to the Eviscerator immediately. Captain Rysa can take the shuttle back to its hangar on the destroyer."

"Very well." Zymen nodded, and Rysa nodded alongside him on the digital conference. "I'm giving you a week of time before I begin squadron-wide drills. If you cannot get your crew under control by then, we'll just space those new slaves you brought in and let your ship be handled by your original men."

The remaining details and instructions were hammered out in the next few minutes. Claris sat unobtrusively on the captain's seat, fingering her command ring.

As the only real communications and sensor specialist on this ship, it was child's play to manipulate the ship systems. She had the camera's along her route to the aft portside section looped to show empty hallways. Smuggling in the plasma self-igniter module from a stripped out plasma pistol she bought beforehand and dumping it through the refueling nozzle behind the panels was also easy enough. Sure, some of her genetic material and other traces may have been left behind, but the blast would be sufficient to wipe out all those traces. And to be certain that any evidence would be scorched, she had discretely pumped more oxygen into that section to enhance the firestorm. Nothing recognizable should be left in the hallway.

The Second of the Eviscerator chose the site of the sabotage deliberately close to Rysa's quarters in order to affect the visitor. Killing the bitch outright would cause up a huge stink, so Claris opted to scare her into leaving the Evie instead.

Now, with Harry returning, Dr. Selner would finally get her come-uppance. After all, it was 'her' crew that caused all these latest troubles. This incident would be blamed on the slaves regardless of any arguments that they might put forward. They were the most obvious trouble makers on the ship and the likely suspects of sabotage.

Images of Dr. Selner's downfall continued to play in Claris' imagination. Maybe Harry would finally snap out of his lovesick crush and kick out that tramp out of the airlock.

End Notes: Looks like I've reached another milestone and hit the 100k word mark.

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